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To Isabel, Countess of Buchan, a courageous and
beautiful flame. May her memory always burn brightly.

Other Novellas by Brandy Lee
Sweet Surrender

Eternal Passion

Brandy Lee



Eternal Passion
Published by ImaJinn Books

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The Dream

“Stay here with me, lass.”

Husky with passion, his voice in her ear made her heart leap. She couldn't speak, could only reach for him, body rising to meet his in the thick dark night shadows that enveloped them. Never enough time, never enough privacy, only moments stolen together...raw emotion filled her with a sense of overwhelming urgency.

Reaching for him, she slid her hands down his body and found him hard and ready for her. Fingers curled around the turgid length, caressed him until she heard his groan in her ear and knew he was impatient for her. As she was for him.

“Yes, my heart,” she whispered when he asked if she loved him, “for all eternity.”

His hands were on her breasts, teasing her nipples into rigid aching points and setting her thighs aflame with need, and she parted her legs eagerly when he nudged her knees apart. Then he was there, sliding inside her, a swift thrust that sent shivers of ecstasy rippling through her.

Clinging to him, she arched her hips to take him all as tension tightened, awareness of imminent danger only making the moment more intense. Shadows hid the world for now, but they would lift soon enough and she'd have this moment to remember forever...

Just before release, at the very moment when climax was but a breath away, she awoke to find herself alone, her body throbbing with frustration, and sadness a crushing weight. It was only the dream that haunted her nights. He was gone. Again. Silly to even think it, but she just knew that one day she'd awaken from dreams to find true love lying beside her again...

One

North Carolina, 2004

“My lord, the Earl of Fife is being held in England as a ward of the crown and is unable to uphold the hereditary tradition of crowning you Scotland’s king.”

Wearing royal robes and vestments, Robert the Bruce nodded. “‘Tis enough that I have three bishops and my four earls with me.”

Lord Lennox went to one knee before him, his head bowed. “Aye, my lord.”

The great banner of the kings of Scotland with its lion and scarlet lilies fluttered in a slight wind. Wooden floorboards creaked. Someone coughed. Heavy velvet curtains shifted, and ropes hummed. Music swelled from the orchestra pit.

It was not at all like Susan Keith had thought it’d be.

She stood in the wings just offstage, watching and waiting for her cue. This was her first performance. Butterflies beat in her stomach and her knees were wobbly. It didn’t help that soap opera star Ryan Douglas was her leading man, either. She still fantasized about him, even after weeks of rehearsals had resulted in nothing more than cordiality between them. There was just something about him that drew her. Besides the fact he really was a gorgeous man. Thick dark hair, vivid blue eyes, tall and with a great body—oh yeah. Definite leading man material, though she’d read the tabloids enough to know he had a whole string of gorgeous ex-girlfriends behind him. Not that she’d ever have a chance with him. She was just an ordinary small-town girl who’d somehow been lucky enough to be cast opposite him for this benefit play in his old hometown of Greensboro, North Carolina. She should have figured nothing would come of it. Most of the relationships in her life

had been that way, with few notable exceptions.

Adjusting the tight sleeves of her medieval costume, Susan focused on her lines instead of her personal life. As the doomed Lady Buchan who had crowned Robert Bruce as King of the Scots, she summoned up emotions that her character would feel: Excitement, passion, pride—and youthful recklessness. After all, Isabel had defied her husband and the English king to ride halfway across Scotland as a hereditary representative of her family.

Finally she heard her cue. Ryan, playing the Bruce, said, “Bring Lady Buchan to me.”

Sweeping onstage, Susan went straight to where Ryan stood before a throne and dipped to one knee in a low curtsy. “My lord, I have come to fulfill the duty my brother the earl is unable to perform. It is my honor to uphold our hereditary office and crown you king.”

She tilted back her head to gaze up at him with admiration, projecting the hero-worship the nineteen-year-old Isabel had no doubt felt for the attractive and magnetic king. It wasn’t a big stretch at all. Ryan was as attractive and magnetic as any king could ever have been. A shiver went through her when he met her gaze, something electric and breathtaking. Every time he met her eyes she had an overwhelming sense of connection, a powerful current that bound her to him with some invisible force. It was so strange, but must just be his stage presence, though there were moments when she’d caught him staring at her, too. With her hands clasped before her, she gazed at him as he put out a hand to touch her lightly on the shoulder, and for that instant could almost believe he was the man he portrayed onstage. A king. A knight in shining armor...

Intense blue eyes held her gaze, and his voice was deep and slightly husky, vibrating through her when he spoke the lines, “You are wed to my enemy, the Earl of Buchan, an ally of King Edward and close kinsman of Red Comyn, who tried to kill me in Greyfriars Chapel. Dare you risk the wrath of your husband and the English king to crown me?”

Reaching for the hand he held out to help her to her feet, she said, “I dare, my lord king. I would risk all for a man such

as you.”

Their fingers touched, and at that moment a crack of lightning blistered the air. The old building shook with a rumble of thunder and lights flickered. Someone in the audience gave a small shriek that was quickly stifled. The orchestra faltered, then picked up again. Susan tried to remember her next line, glanced up to find Ryan looking offstage, a slight frown crowding his eyes. Then she smelled smoke. An alarm shrilled, and people began to panic. Voices lifted in a warning to stay calm, not to panic, but no one paid attention. Hesitating, she realized she was standing, and thought that Ryan must have lifted her to her feet. The lights flickered again then went out completely, plunging the theater into dense blackness.

Smoke thickened, screams ricocheted off drapery-covered walls, and the relentless wail of fire alarms grew deafening. Susan stumbled, felt a hand on her arm and heard a husky voice in her ear telling her to keep going, not to stop, just hold tight to him and he'd get her through this. She clung to Ryan's arm, fingers curled tightly in the velvet of his costume. Ironical, that a man she'd begun to think of as a white knight should rescue her, she thought vaguely, coughing as acrid smoke burned her eyes and nose and throat. Familiar corridors became an unfamiliar maze, and twice they bumped into scenery or walls. Chaos reigned. Screams, smoke, thunder created a collage of confusion. It grew difficult to breathe. Real fear turned her insides cold, and she tripped over the dragging hem of her gown and went down before she could catch herself.

“Susan!” Ryan bent beside her, lashed out with his sword when someone almost trampled them, the nonlethal prop still inflicting damage but saving them from being crushed. “Get up, girl. Come on. I'll get you out of here.”

She wasn't sure if she said it or thought it, but suddenly she knew he'd keep her safe, knew he'd get them both out of the burning theater. It was odd, but she had a fleeting sense of *déjà vu*, as if she'd been here before, been in grave danger yet knew he'd rescue her. And she suddenly knew exactly what he'd say next, his words coming out of darkness and smoke and flames: “Stay here with me, lass.”

A loud crack made the very ground shake, as if a brick wall was falling. Voices whirled around her and she spun with them, heard vague snatches of half-remembered conversations in strange accents, saw swift images flash before her then disappear just before oblivion came crashing down.

Scotland, 1306

“Stay here with me, lass.” The voice came out of the shadows and smoke, startling her, and she paused with one hand against stone, turning to find the source. A man stepped into the flickering light of towering flames that leaped and cavorted high into the air.

Drawing herself up, she said briskly, “You may call me Countess, not lass.”

Smoke from a May Day fire in the courtyard smudged the sky, stung her nose and eyes and throat. A lazy grin flashed at her in the gloom, and he bowed mockingly from the waist. “So I can. My lady.”

The last was added after a deliberate pause, and she narrowed her eyes at him. She knew him. Sir Alex Campbell, a rogue knight if ever she’d seen one. If she wasn’t loath to cast a pall on the festivities, she’d make him regret his impudence. Instead, she set her mouth in a straight line and looked away to watch the sun sink slowly behind the parapets. Pale walls reflected crimson light from the sun, and the huge fire cast strange shadows on the stones of Kildrummy Castle. The knight watched her boldly instead of showing deference to her rank, yet she held her tongue.

Turning her back on the rude Highlander, she moved closer to the gatehouse despite his command to remain close. He followed her, making no pretense of tact or subtlety.

“Do not play the fool, m’lady. I’ve no desire to chase after you. Danger lurks beyond these high walls.”

She sniffed her contempt. “When has it not? England and Scotland have been hard at war these ten years past. Now that the Bruce has been crowned king, hostilities will only increase. I’m not afraid. I shall walk where I please when I please.”

“You are Lady Montgomery, are you not?”

“And if I am?” She turned back to face him, and had to look up to meet his gaze. He was tall, much taller than most, with a mane of glossy dark hair and piercing blue eyes beneath a strong brow.

“A bonny lad,” she’d heard the queen’s lady-in-waiting say with a sigh, then add softly, “and a devil in bed and battle, ‘tis said.” Just remembering that comment made her heart beat a little faster and the blood race through her veins. Despite the fair evening, her legs began to tremble and her hands to shake, and a knot tightened in the pit of her stomach.

“And if you are,” he said softly, stepping even closer to her, “I am charged with your protection. You will bide by my commands, my lady.”

“Will I?” she asked after a moment, tilting her head to one side to look at him through her lashes, a ploy that often reduced men to quivering confusion. The Highlander only grinned more broadly.

“Aye. You will. And you can save that simpering glance for a lesser man. My lady.”

Heat flushed her cheeks and she looked quickly away. Curse him! He made her feel like a child instead of a woman already widowed. A husband she’d hardly known had died when the English savaged their home in pursuit of Robert the Bruce. While their keep had been violated, she’d been left untouched. On the outside, anyway. A pervasive feeling of doom had stayed with her since then, so that she often found herself empty, cold and dead inside.

Yet now, with this man looming over her like Judgment Day, she felt only reckless and excited. Alive, for the first time in months. Days and weeks had passed in a blur of moving by rote, of doing what was expected, what she must, and now on May Day an odd pulsing excitement coursed through her that had nothing to do with the noisy festivities, and much to do with the handsome Scot staring down at her so insolently. So she stared back, meeting his gaze.

“Why are you set to watch me? There are others here much more important. The queen. Countess Buchan. The king’s sister

and even his daughter—why must you follow me about?”

“Because I drew the short straw.”

Speechless, she stared at him, then saw the devilry dancing in his eyes. “Then you are the winner, I presume,” she said after a moment, and he grinned.

“Aye, my lady. That I am.” He moved even closer so that she could feel the heat of his body, smell the faint scent of heather and wood smoke that emanated from his garments, the plaid draped over his shoulder held with a heavy gold brooch no doubt embossed with his family crest. Her heart beat a little faster when he said softly, “And now I shall claim my prize.”

She opened her mouth to say something sharp but he caught her by surprise, his hand cupping her chin as he bent swiftly to brush her lips with his own. A jolt like the strike of lightning flashed through her, made the hair stand up on her arms and sent a shiver down her spine. A devil in bed, indeed! Yea, she could well believe it. When he pulled back, she mustered cool self-control she certainly didn’t feel.

“A man could be hanged for such an offense were I to cry foul, Sir Alex.”

“Yea, perhaps so, though I think you will not. Not this time.”

“And why not?” She stared up at him, caught between fascination and insult.

He smiled. “Because you liked it.”

“I think,” she said after a brief, chagrined silence, “that if you try that again you’ll feel my dirk between your ribs. I’d not advise you to risk it, Sir Alex.”

Still smiling, he put a hand over his heart. “You wound me with just the thought of your displeasure, my lady.”

“Somehow, I think not.” Flustered, she backed away from him to return to the great hall at the north side of the keep. Revelers gathered around the fire that burned brightly in the huge courtyard, and sheep had already been jumped through the smoke like May Days of previous years. She could scarcely recall them, the days of laughter and pleasure without the threat of war hanging over all their heads. It’d been so long ago, ten years past at least, when William Wallace had first rebelled

against King Edward. There'd been little enough of laughter that she could recall since her marriage to David Montgomery, either. He'd not been brutal or cruel, just indifferent. A man devoted to war and hunting, not a wife. It'd not been surprising when he'd been killed.

What surprised her now was that she'd responded to a brief kiss from a rogue knight with little to recommend him but a handsome face and winsome smile. And she wanted him to kiss her again...

Two

Alex watched her walk away from him, her hips gently swaying as she picked a path across the crowded dirt courtyard to the great hall. Ever since he'd been sent at the king's command with Nigel Bruce to escort the women to Kildrummy, he'd been watching Lady Montgomery. Nigel had seen him watching her, a source of great amusement to him. The king's brother had a wicked sense of humor and a fair face, and jested that Alex's way with the ladies wooed away too many of the fairest damsels.

"Lady Gillian is a lovely widow, though not a wealthy one," he'd said, nudging Alex. "Still, her father was Earl of Wakefield so she's heiress to lands in Easter Ross that may interest a landless knight able to wrest them back from the English."

"I'm not landless," he'd said, but Nigel didn't listen. He rarely did. He'd made up his mind that Alex should court the Lady Gillian and he'd bedevil him until he did.

Alex had intended to thwart Nigel by having the lady reject him forcefully and soundly; he just hadn't thought he'd actually like kissing her. She'd seemed far too cold, too remote. Yet beneath that icy exterior lurked the heat and heart of a woman ready for a man. He'd felt her shiver, felt the swift, tentative response in her mouth as her lips parted for him. Yea, she was ripe for love even if he was not. Not for the kind of love a woman like her would require. He preferred a tumble on a bed of straw with some buxom wench who wanted nothing more than stolen pleasure. Lady Montgomery was a countess. Widowed by her husband's fondness for the boar hunt, and his foolishness for hunting alone. The English had caught him out and slain him, then taken his keep despite the lady's resistance. A waste, to leave such a woman widowed.

And a lovely widow indeed, with fair hair caught in thick

plaits and bound with silk ribbons, and amber eyes like gold coins in a heart-shaped face. Perhaps Nigel was right, though he'd never admit it to him or he'd grow insufferable. The Lady Gillian could certainly tempt him to while away some summer hours with her since there was little else to do until the Bruce summoned them. He oft chafed at the inactivity, fretted to be in battle beside his king, yet knew the importance of guarding the queen and her ladies. And there might yet be compensation for his task.

A door banged and Alex smiled, then strode toward the great hall at the far end of the courtyard. Stone towers rose on each side of the roughly D-shaped castle, with the chapel on the east side and the lord's chambers in the Snow Tower on the west, and behind the north wall of the keep lay a deep ravine that protected it from invaders. The great hall snugged up against that north wall.

There was no fireplace in the great hall, only a huge brass brazier that provided heat. Low stone benches built into the walls often bore the blanket-wrapped forms of sleeping men and women. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the change from the leaping light in the courtyard to the dull gleam of torches stuck in sconces on the stone walls. Then he saw her, the Lady Gillian seated at a trestle table with a flagon of wine and a trencher of meat. Several other ladies chatted nearby, and he saw two of them glance sideways at him as he crossed the hall. One of them was Alyse of Inch, who had shared his pallet quite energetically a few times before he'd grown bored with her inane chatter and possessive jealousy. Alyse watched with narrowed eyes as he approached Lady Montgomery.

"My lady," he said when he reached her, and Lady Gillian glanced up at him with a cool amber gaze that made his blood race, "you are wanted in the solar."

It was true. He wanted her there, wanted to explore this newfound interest in a woman who did not leap eagerly into his embrace but held him at bay. It was a novel experience, for the women he chose usually responded to his attentions.

"Pray, Lady Gillian," Alyse said, "you'd best take your eating dagger with you if you go alone with Sir Alex. Unless

of course, you wish to come back to the hall with straw in your hair.”

Alex ignored her, but saw Gillian’s eyes flick toward Alyse then back to him. He waited, and in a moment, she rose from the trestle table.

“Please lead the way, sir.”

An unexpected pang of guilt at his subterfuge assailed him, but he quickly smothered it. She wanted only to irritate Alyse. Their conflicts were obvious. He’d learned long ago that women kept in close quarters often tended to quarrel between themselves, their petty grievances equal to major insults that no man would ever suffer without bloodshed. Some of their verbal barbs drew blood, and he’d found it amazing to see those same females in smiling conversation later. So he largely ignored any hint of strife between women. It was best not to get involved.

Once in the solar, empty at this time of night, he closed the door and turned to look at Lady Gillian. She stood in the center of the chamber, torchlight glinting on her hair with hints of red among the gold strands. A simple coronet of gilt and blue circled her head, the silk twisted into a coil that bound her hair away from her face, fashioned of the same material as the ribbons woven into her plaits.

“Who has summoned me here to the lord’s solar?” Gillian asked, a little frown knitting her brow. She looked about the empty chamber uncertainly.

“A knight who admires you,” he said promptly, and saw her confusion increase. Then she gave him a startled look, eyes widening a little.

“You?”

“Aye.” He took a bold step closer. Faint of heart ne’er won the day. Or the lady’s favors. Lady Gillian didn’t move, even when he put a hand out to caress her cheek. Her skin was soft, sleek satin beneath his hand, and he couldn’t resist sliding his fingers into the wealth of hair at the nape of her neck. He drew her yet closer, heard her breathing quicken, saw her lips part as if she meant to speak. Quickly, he bent his head to cover her mouth with his own, tasting the honeyed sweetness

of her, heat coursing through him when she didn't push him away. She yielded to the kiss, parting her lips to allow his tongue access. Ah, he'd been right in his assessment of her as ready for a night of love...he moved his hand from her neck lower, pressing into the small of her back so that her breasts pushed into his chest.

A sudden sharp pain in his ribs distracted him but he didn't release her, only drew back to stare down into her face. She smiled.

"'Tis the point of my dirk you feel, Sir Alex. Should you wish your blood spilled upon the stones, it can be arranged."

After a brief pause, he nodded. "Aye, your point is well-taken, my lady."

"Excellent. Release me, sir."

He did, and stood there looking down at her, half-amused, half-wary. "Anything for the lady with the sharp dagger?"

A speculative light gleamed in her eyes, quickly veiled by lowered lashes before she nodded. "Anything?"

"Within reason." He could have easily taken the dirk away from her, but allowed her the fiction of having the upper hand for the moment, curious to what she would say next.

"Bar the door, Sir Alex."

That was unexpected. He arched a brow, thought about refusing, then decided to comply. When it was done, he turned back to look at her. Tension vibrated in her slender frame, and the hand holding the dirk quivered slightly although she looked determined enough. She gestured with the weapon.

"Now unbuckle your sword belt."

He didn't hesitate. Even unarmed, he could easily best her should she turn vicious. Slowly, he unbuckled the wide leather sword belt around his waist and let it slide to the floor at his feet. Then he stood there with his arms at his sides, feet spread apart for balance, watching her with slightly narrowed eyes.

"I await your pleasure, my lady Gillian."

A flush rose in her cheeks at his mockery and bold familiarity. She put out her tongue to wet her lips, a nervous gesture that he found intriguing. A pulse beat rapidly in the hollow of her throat, just above the low scoop neck of her gilt-

edged gown. Even more intriguing...

When he took a step toward her, she lifted the dirk higher. "Nay, Sir Knight, you are at my mercy this eve. I am not a woman to be bedded and forgotten as you have so many others. Yea, did you not think we would discuss your amorous pursuits? Your latest conquests are often an amusing subject while we ply our needles around the fire."

"And which needles would those be," he wondered aloud, his mouth twisting in a wry smile. "Tapestry needles or wagging tongues?"

"We are adept at both. And I am more adept with this dirk than you may think." He made no answer to that, just waited, and in a moment she gestured toward him again. "Your plaide. Remove it."

"To what purpose?"

"Have you no sense of adventure, Sir Alex?"

It was the way she said it, her head tilted slightly to one side and a faint smile curving that luscious mouth that decided him. He unfastened the brooch on his shoulder that held the plaide pinned to his sherte, then let it fall to a puddle of dark blue and green wool at his booted feet. It left him clad in only the brief sherte and his boots. A draft wavered up from cold stones, but heat coursed through his body with every beat of his heart.

Lady Gillian's eyes widened slightly, went dark gold beneath her delicately arched brows, and her lips parted. In a husky murmur, she said, "Now the sherte, Sir Knight."

"I wear only a noble stretch of hide beneath my sherte and plaide," he warned, and she nodded.

"Yea, 'tis as I suspected."

It took only a moment to shed the linen sherte, and when it lay atop the plaide, he reached for her. She did not resist, but came willingly enough into his arms, her eyes half-closed, lips parted in a faint smile. He slid his hands into the top of her bodice, pulled it down to bare her breasts, heard the swift intake of her breath as he caressed the small firm globes. Nipples hardened against his palms, and he teased them between his thumbs and fingers. A shiver went through her as he bent to

kiss her again, capturing her mouth, jabbing his tongue inside. If she thought to test him, she'd soon learn her mistake. He knew what pleased a woman, an education gathered through many encounters over the course of his twenty-eight years. As Lady Gillian would soon discover.

Blood pounded more rapidly through his veins, pooled in his groin, made him throb with a familiar ache. He pressed even closer, so that his stiff cock nudged against her soft velvet skirts. One arm reached behind her to hold her tightly to him. Torches sputtered and hissed in wall sconces, and the chaos in the hall beyond the barred door receded so that all he heard was the lady's soft moan. Unexpected but not unwelcome, this swift capitulation. He tugged at her laces, untied them with experienced motions and slid his fingers into the side opening of her gown to caress her smooth skin. She wore no undertunic, only the simple blue gown over her slender curves.

"Nay, sir knight," she gasped against his mouth when he began to draw up her skirts to bunch them in his fist, "wait!"

He ignored her and slid his hand up the silky curve of her bare thighs to her waist, still holding crumpled velvet. His knuckles grazed the patch of curls at the apex of her thighs. Releasing her skirts, he touched the springy mat of curls, slid a finger into her satiny recess to stroke her, spreading damp heat through the folds. Her thighs spread, muscles quivering as he caressed her, her breath coming swiftly. She shuddered, little moans sounding in the back of her throat as he found the tiny feminine nub that he knew was sensitive. Stroking it, still kissing her, he heard her dirk drop to the stone floor as she grasped his arms and held tightly.

Gently, he eased her a few steps back until she came to rest against the edge of the table holding a branch of candles that flickered in the gloom. She didn't look at him when he set her up on the table, but kept her fingers curled around his arms. He leaned forward between her thighs so that his hard cock nudged into the damp curls. Then he touched the pink peaks of her nipples, tight like tiny rose buds. She shivered, and he bent to suck a nipple into his mouth. Her fingers tightened so that her nails dug into his arm muscles. He sucked

harder, cradling her breast with one hand while his other teased her other nipple. She arched into him with a long moan of need. He pressed forward so that the head of his cock rubbed against the sensitive nub of her sex, stroking it slowly at first, then faster and faster until she shuddered uncontrollably.

Crying out, her thighs closed around his cock and she bucked against him in jerky movements. He held her until she quieted, felt her finally go limp in his arms and let out a heavy breath, then he kissed her again. Her eyes were closed, and a flush rode her high cheekbones. The pulse in the hollow of her throat still beat like the rapid wings of a dove.

Trapped between her satiny thighs, his cock throbbed for release. He reached down to lift her for easier access, but she stopped him with a hand on his wrist.

"Wait," she whispered, sounding shaky, and flashed a wobbly smile when he looked up at her. "I would pleasure you as you have me."

"I intend for you to," he muttered, but allowed her to push him back a step. She slid from the table, skirts falling to cover her bare legs, and he reached for her before she stepped quickly away.

"Nay, Sir Alex, give me a moment."

Impatient, aching, he stood with his legs apart, then sucked in a sharp breath when she dropped to her knees before him. Looking up, she smiled as she reached for him, caressing the rigid length of his cock with her fingertips, little fluttery touches that sent bolts of lightning all the way to his toes. Clenching his teeth, he stared down at her, arms at his sides, watching in disbelief and delight. She held him in her hand, stroked him, her grip tightening slightly as her movements increased, and he closed his eyes and focused on the pleasure vibrating through him at her touch. When she paused for a moment, he waited, then shuddered when he felt the damp heat of her tongue along his length. It was all he could do not to explode. He groaned, a deep guttural sound that rumbled in the back of his throat. Heat scoured him, and his hands tightened into fists as he restrained the urge to reach for her.

After a moment she paused again, this time murmuring

something he didn't quite catch. Lost in the thick haze of raw need, it took him a moment to realize that she'd moved away from him. He opened his eyes just in time to see her unbar the door. Too startled to react quickly, he met her hot gaze. Anger lit her amber eyes and turned them to molten gold.

"I am not one of your casual conquests, Sir Alex. It would serve you well to keep that in mind. You have not used me. I have used you."

Then she was through the door, leaving it ajar as she disappeared. Frustrated lust beat through him, and it was only when he turned to retrieve his sherte and plaide that he discovered them gone. Curse her! He'd been stranded in the solar wearing only his boots—and an erection.

And in that instant, he knew he wanted her more fiercely than he had ever before wanted any woman.

Three

Still shaking, Gillian threw his garments into an alcove then ran for the stairs. She didn't pause until she'd reached the second-floor chamber used by the queen. It was empty. Grateful for the privacy, she went to the wide stone window that looked out over the dark ravine and tried to still her rapidly beating heart. She'd never meant it to go so far. He'd surprised her—nay, her own body had surprised her with its betrayal at his touch. When he'd so arrogantly commanded her to the solar and she'd realized he meant to seduce her, anger prompted her to turn the tables. But she'd meant only to pretend response, to lure him with the hope of compliance before rejecting him. She'd certainly never meant to let him touch her so intimately.

And she'd never thought that a man's touch could feel so good, either. David had never touched her like that, indeed, had seemed to care only for his own pleasure without regard to hers at all. Thankfully, he'd not come to her bed often after the first month of marriage, complaining that she was too cold to suit him. He'd much preferred the arms of a servant to those of his wife. A humiliation that had not escaped her notice, though she'd never acknowledged it to anyone. It was too painful.

Always in the back of her mind was the suspicion that he'd been right, that she was too cold for any man to love. While she'd not been in love with David, just dutifully wed him to consolidate their estates—a futile pact in light of the fact both their estates were now in English hands—it'd still been a huge blow to realize that her youthful dreams of love would never happen. Foolish dreams, her old nurse had scolded her once, for she'd been born to better things. Why, royal blood ran in her veins, her ancestry going all the way back to the MacAlpin.

What would old Seonaid say if she knew Gillian had encouraged a rough Highland knight's attentions? She'd have used a willow switch on her for even smiling at him, no doubt. But Seonaid was long past this world's cares now, and Gillian had been abandoned to her fate along with her husband. Now she had a place with the queen. Tentative at best. She would have to keep her temper in check and not react hastily, or she would find herself disgraced.

Yet the memory of that unexpected and shattering response to Sir Alex's caresses still left her unsettled and all quivery inside. She'd never thought it could feel like that. Indeed, Alex Campbell was the first man she had touched so intimately. David had always come to her bed at night when the candles were nearly guttered, usually smelling of drink and the hunt. It'd been distinctly unpleasant. Alex Campbell had smelled like wood smoke and heather, not wine and a boar's blood. Yea, a vast difference indeed. And she had given in to her curiosity and caressed him, slid her fingers over his swollen organ and been amazed at the size and shape of it.

A shiver racked her. He'd been hot beneath her hand, soft and hard at the same time...it'd surprised her, the contrast. It wasn't as if she was exactly innocent of a man's body, but she wasn't experienced with passion. Her body's reaction had been shocking—and exciting. And she couldn't stop thinking about it. About him. How he'd felt beneath her hand, how he'd made her feel.

She leaned on the wide window sill scattered with velvet pillows. The smell of smoke drifted in the open window that looked out over the Black Ravine. A slight breeze shifted a wall tapestry, cooled her fevered skin, and made her yearn for a freedom she hadn't had since she was a small girl. She felt so trapped, by circumstances beyond her control, by the rigid strictures of her position and all that was expected of her. There were times—

“Are you planning to jump, my lady?”

Startled, she whirled around, and her heart thudded frantically when she saw Sir Alex in the open door of the queen's chamber. Putting her hands behind her to brace herself

against the stone window ledge, she managed to meet his gaze steadily.

“Is that a threat?”

“More like a strong suggestion.” He looked dangerous. Tension vibrated through him. He had found his plaide and it was thrown carelessly over one shoulder as if he’d dressed hastily, his sword belt holding it around his waist. He crossed the chamber in long, deliberate strides. “If you were a man—”

“If I were a man, Sir Alex, I doubt very seriously you would have found yourself in such awkward circumstances,” she interrupted sharply. “You’ve only your arrogance to blame.”

He’d come so close she could almost count his individual eyelashes now, the heat of him washing over her when he came to a stop barely an arm’s length away. The drumming of blood in her ears sounded like ocean waves, loud and crashing, drowning out everything but an intense awareness of him. Acute anticipation sizzled, so that when he put out his hand to pull her to him, the contact was almost a relief.

Her lips formed a protest that went unuttered as his mouth clamped down over hers in a fierce possession. She should have been more prepared, but her hands were trapped between their bodies so that she felt the rapid thud of his heart beneath her palm.

He backed her up against the window ledge and leaned into her so that she felt the hard nudge of his erection even through his plaide and her skirts. Intense heat bloomed between her thighs, searing and breathtaking, a promise and reminder of what he’d done in the solar. As if she needed a reminder...

Gillian grabbed at his plaide to keep from sliding to the floor. Her fingers curled into the wool and clung. He pulled back slightly, then slid his hands along the bare skin of her collarbone to the gilt edging of her bodice and lower, dragging the cloth down to bare her breasts. Cool air from the open window made her nipples knot into hard buds. Cupping her breasts in his palms, he teased the taut peaks between his fingers and thumbs. Exquisite sensation shot through her, a pulse throbbed in that damp place between her thighs, and she arched

upward instead of pulled away. Instant heat flashed to the pit of her stomach. She should tell him to stop, but found herself clinging to him instead, fingers digging into rough plaide and hard muscle. Caution faded. She arched her back, closed her eyes and shuddered when he bent to take a nipple into his mouth, his tongue lashing it with erotic sensations. It felt...exquisite.

The insistent pulse throbbed between her thighs, unfamiliar and arousing as he suckled her breasts with strong tugs that made her ache with need. Then he put his hand beneath her skirt and stroked her private parts in an erotic caress, fingers rough and warm and sending shocks like lightning to every nerve ending in her entire body. He seemed to know how it felt; he focused on that most sensitive part, the tiny nub between her nether lips that quivered with anticipation at each leisurely stroke of his fingertips. Everything was a heated haze of urgency and shivering ecstasy.

“Oh...sweet Mary...”

The thick voice sounded like her own. It must be, because his mouth was filled with her nipple. She shuddered again. After a moment he lifted his head, looked down at her, his eyes as glazed as hers surely were. Desire sharpened his features, drew skin taut across high cheekbones, and his mouth thinned into a harsh slash.

In a rough voice he growled, “Ye like that, d’ye, lass?”

She should have said No, but she didn’t. She just looked back at him, unwilling to admit it but unable to deny it. His mouth curled into a smile.

“Aye, ‘tis plain enough that you like it—your eyes say what your lips will not.”

Before she could form a single word, he slid his finger into her body and his thumb raked across the sensitive bud of her sex as his mouth captured her tight nipple again. As he rolled her nipple between his teeth and tongue, her thighs opened for him and her hips thrust eagerly into his hand.

It was lunacy to respond to him like this, when at any moment someone could come into the queen’s chamber and discover them. Couplings weren’t uncommon, as life in a castle

offered little privacy, but she was a countess, and to be caught with her skirts around her waist and this Highland knight's hand inside her would be humiliating.

Yet she couldn't stop, not when release hovered so near, when the promise of that earlier ecstasy lay within her grasp. She bucked against his hand, shuddering, her fingers moving to curl into his hair to hold him against her breast, the delicious heat of his mouth sucking her nipple and his thumb across her sex making her reckless. So close now, so close...tension drawing her ever so near that elusive release...

Then his hand withdrew and she whimpered in frustration, only to gasp when his finger was replaced with the hard steel of his cock against her damp nether lips. He sucked harder on her nipple, lips nibbling at it as he spread her thighs wider and pulled her forward so that she leaned back on the stone ledge and pillows, then he was inside her with a swift, hard thrust that made her cry out again, a soft keening sound. Rough, delicious invasion, filling her so completely she couldn't move, could only hold on to him as he thrust forward again, this time a slow push of his shaft so deep inside her that she could barely breathe.

Velvet pillows beneath her, dark wind behind her, and hard steel inside her, all blended into a rising tide of urgency. Her body contracted around him, inner muscles squeezing his cock and making him groan, and she knew that he felt it as much as she did, that hovering need for release. He muttered something she didn't quite catch, then began to move inside her, slowly at first before gathering speed and power in a fierce thrust and drag that made her body convulse around him in exquisite reaction.

His hands moved beneath her hips to pull her forward until she lay fully back against the cushioned ledge, and his fingers dug into bare flesh as he pounded into her body. Her skirts were up around her waist and her naked breasts exposed, and yet she didn't care. Nothing mattered but that shattering ecstasy that awaited them both. Leaning over her, he stroked in and out as tension grew tighter and tighter. She lifted her legs and spread them wide for him.

He bent to her breast again, first one and then the other, sucking her nipple into his mouth in strong strokes that matched the thrust of his cock inside her, and she arched upward in heated, mindless need, whispering encouragement.

“Yes...yes...like that...oh don’t stop.”

Then he put his hand down between them and rubbed his thumb over that sensitive bud at the top of her sex as he shoved his cock even more deeply inside her. It burst on her suddenly, powerful and obliterating everything but waves of white-hot ecstasy that made her cry out and cling to him, her legs locking around his waist as she bucked ferociously against him.

He held on tightly until she quieted, then gave a final few thrusts and a low guttural groan before pulling quickly out of her body. A shudder went through him, and he leaned between her legs with a sigh.

“Marry, but I never thought you’d be so sweet, lass.”

She didn’t feel sweet. She felt—wanton. As passion faded, reason returned. Abruptly, she pushed him off her and sat up, shoving her skirts down and tugging up her bodice to cover her breasts. Alex looked into her eyes and smiled, a faintly sardonic twist of his mouth.

“And now you will be like the other *ladies* and pretend this didn’t happen, I suppose.”

She flushed, for that thought had indeed flitted through her mind. “I should.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because it’s not meet that...that we should just rut like animals in heat.”

“My dear lady, we are animals. All of us. And there was no more to this coupling than just rutting. You may try to deny it, but you can’t lie to yourself.”

Of course, he was accustomed to coupling in corners with ladies, and she should have remembered that. She jerked at her bodice, ripping the gilt embroidery, flustered and unsettled. “You’re wrong. I’m not like the others you’ve been with. This is...is not a common thing for me.”

“Aye. ‘Tis plain to see that.” He put out a hand to touch her cheek, fingers lifting her chin so that she had to look into

his eyes. "And 'tis plain to see there's more to you than I first thought there'd be, my lady. Perhaps I owe you an apology."

"For...for this?"

"Not for the act, no. I cannot regret that. But I do regret that I misjudged you."

Confused, she just looked at him.

Something flickered deep in his eyes, then he shrugged. "I thought you more honest than you are. My mistake, m'lady."

She wanted to protest that she was honest, but he gave her no chance. He bowed from the waist, then pivoted on his heel and left her standing alone in the queen's chamber. Only the echo of his boots on stone marked his passage, and after a moment, she turned to look out the window into the darkness and ponder her hypocrisy.

Four

Alex didn't see Lady Montgomery for several days after being with her in the queen's chamber. He endured the ribald comments of his companions—one of whom had found him naked and furious in the hallway after being stranded in the solar and been happy to share that discovery with the rest. No doubt it was all over the castle by now that the lady had divested him of plaide and pride in a neat stroke.

For some reason, he had no desire to retrieve his pride at the lady's expense. It would be a secret between them that he'd reaped his reward in the queen's chamber unless she chose to reveal it. He wasn't completely without chivalry.

Only Alyse seemed to suspect something, and he'd caught her staring speculatively at him in the hall as if she knew well enough he'd not let Lady Montgomery escape without some form of retribution. But then Alyse would certainly have exacted vengeance if put in a similar position, for she wasn't a woman to suffer lightly a blow to her vanity. He knew that well enough.

So tension accompanied evening meals taken in the hall with Alyse giving him glances sharp as daggers, and Nigel Bruce taking it all in with a huge grin and adding his own verbal jabs. The absence of Lady Gillian was duly noted.

"The fair lady from the Snow Tower has more fire than ice, 'tis said," he jested with a sly tilt of his head toward Alex. "'Tis also said that more than the summer heat has thawed the lovely widow."

"And 'tis said that the king's brother has more tongue than wit," Alex replied without looking at Nigel, and heard him roar with laughter.

"Yea, that has been said by more than one luckless soul," he said between chuckles, "but ne'er before to my face."

Alex looked up at last. "Your winsome face has saved you thus far, but I'm not as susceptible as some."

Nigel only grinned more broadly. "You may yet get your chance at swordplay once we have a large enough force to face the English."

Word had come that Robert Bruce had managed to raise more men from his own lordship of Garioch and from the estates of the Earl of Atholl in Strathaan and Strathbegie, and continued on to raise forces in the domains of the Earl of Mar, who was the Countess of Buchan's younger brother. The English had appointed the Earl of Pembroke—cousin of the king and kin to the murdered Red Comyn—as lieutenant over Scotland. Reports came of terrible tales of massacre and the looting of estates and towns and even monasteries. In violation of the code of chivalry, King Edward had just decreed that any woman of the rebels was subject to outlawry, thus leaving them vulnerable to rape and murder. It left everyone on edge, watching the hilly horizon, waiting with dread and anticipation for an attack that had yet to come.

"Yea," Alex said grimly, "and I pray that chance comes soon. I weary of the wait."

"As do we all." Nigel looked suddenly somber. "As do we all."

A flash of blue velvet caught his eye, and Alex looked past the king's brother to the end of the hall where Lady Gillian had just appeared. She paused, and their gazes met over crowded trestle tables and noise. Her hair was unbound, streaming over her shoulders, only a circlet of gilt holding it from her eyes. He could see her hesitation, the way her hands fluttered slightly before she curled her fingers into her palms, and knew he was the cause of her distress.

Rising, he left the table without a word, crossing the crowded hall toward the doors and Lady Gillian. She stood still, watching him warily as he approached.

"My lady," he said with a tilt of his head and wry twist of his mouth, "I have quit the hall. You may take your meal unhindered."

"You do not hinder me, Sir Alex." She said it stiffly,

watching him with those amber eyes that made him think of Spanish coins. "Should I wish to sit at table, I would do so whether you were present or not."

For a moment, he didn't know what to say. He thought she meant it, but wasn't sure. For she was certain to have heard the rumors about them flying through the keep, and must think he'd encouraged them. He shrugged, affecting indifference when he didn't feel it, and put a hand on her arm.

"Well," a soft, venomous voice said behind him, "shouldn't you take this tryst to a more private corner? Aye, but you already have and therein lies the problem. I daresay, I certainly had no complaints about Sir Alex, but then, I didn't expect much."

Alyse of Inch lifted a brow and smiled when Alex turned to look at her, but a wealth of malice lay behind the smile. There was no point in responding to her barb for it'd only encourage more, and would put Lady Gillian at a disadvantage.

But then he realized he needn't have worried about the lady, for she merely looked at Alyse and said softly, "Your lamentable lack of expectation is well-known, Mistress Alyse."

Alyse flushed an ugly deep red, and brown eyes snapped angrily as she glared at Gillian. "Perhaps that is better than expecting too much!"

"Perhaps. If that were the case. It is not. Now pardon me while I seek better company."

Gillian moved away, and Alex spared a moment's admiration for her poise before Alyse commanded his attention. She turned on him, fury in her eyes and voice.

"How dare you allow her to speak to me thus!"

"I don't concern myself with women's quarrels."

"You concern yourself often enough with women's favors."

"Yea, when sufficiently tempted."

Alyse moved closer, until her breasts grazed his chest and he could smell the musky scent she wore. "And are you sufficiently tempted now, Sir Alex?"

Not in the least, but he wasn't fool enough to say that aloud. "You are lovely indeed, but this is not the time or place."

Before she could protest, he moved away, going in the opposite direction from Lady Gillian so as not to provoke more

ire from Alyse. He should have known she'd be trouble. He had watched her drag Sir Cedric around by his cock once too often. No woman would ever do that to him, though some had tried, including Mistress Alyse.

Torches spit and sputtered in holders on the courtyard walls, and shadows hugged stone beyond the pools of light. Smoke, horse manure, and other familiar scents spiced the dusky air, mixed with a tangible feeling of expectation. Apprehension was obvious in the sentries walking the walls, in the way a sudden loud sound could pause a conversation or bring heads up to watch the gates. Danger made a constant companion these days.

He was halfway across the courtyard when he spied a familiar figure climbing the spiral staircase to the walls. Pausing, he watched a moment, then followed Lady Gillian. Traces of her flowery scent lingered in the close air of the stairwell. Sweet. Light. Alluring.

In a world filled with much less pleasant scents, the sweetness of her fragrance was more enticing than he'd anticipated, triggering memory and instant caution. Yet he still followed her to the catwalk atop the walls. It was deserted save for the sentries posted at intervals. Her steps were loud on stone up here in the silence, while beyond the walls and hills the sun was a faint haze behind purple crags. This time of year, darkness fell near the midnight hour, and the sun rose again a few hours later. It was as if the season strove to make up for the long winter nights when daylight hours were scant and frozen.

He found her in the doorway of a tower, staring off into the distance where the line of trees and sky made an anonymous blur.

"Why are you following me?" she asked, but didn't sound angry, only slightly curious.

He couldn't answer. Indeed, had no answer that made sense. After a moment, she turned to look directly at him. Diffused light softened her face, shadowed her eyes, but he could still see her wariness as she looked at him, and understood it.

"I did not come to do you harm, m'lady."

"Harm has already been done."

"You were willing enough—"

"That's not what I meant, Sir Alex," she interrupted sharply.

"You must know that gossip runs rife through the keep."

"And you blame me."

"No. I blame myself." She turned to look back across the parapets. "'Tis my own fault I—we—what happened. You are not to blame."

That surprised him, and he stood silent for a moment, thinking. If she'd blamed him, he'd have felt better. As it was, he felt responsible. He should not have pursued her. Widowed only a few months...living in fear, with every day uncertain, and she was only female, after all. It had to be difficult for her. Women weren't strong, couldn't bear the same rigors as men, especially gently-reared women like Lady Gillian. He'd treated her in the same way as he'd regarded Alyse, and taken advantage. Now he should make amends.

"Nay, lady," he said softly, and moved close enough to her that the sweet fragrance she wore made him yearn to touch her. "It is my blame to bear, if blame is the right word. You are—lovely. I've watched you these past weeks, wanting to talk to you, wanting to touch you as I did. But I should have remembered who you are. It was never my intention to dishonor you."

Turning with her back to the parapet, she leaned against stone, regarded him in silence for a long moment before she shook her head, a faint smile curving her mouth. "I wasn't dishonored, Sir Alex. Not the way you mean. If I played the wanton, it was my choice. You merely showed me how easy it is to forget all I've been taught my entire life, to yield to pleasure and ignore the teachings of the church, of my tutors."

"And you were taught it's wrong to find pleasure in love?"

"Isn't it? It's our duty to procreate, to produce children, but not to—"

"Lessons from old men or those with shriveled souls do not apply to flesh and blood, my lady. Life is short. Were it not for pleasure in love, it would not be worth the time spent here."

“Ah, but you have said it yourself, Sir Alex. *Love*. There was no love between us, only pleasure. That is the sin, I think. And yet I sinned gladly and imperiled my soul.”

He had no answer for that, and after a moment, she turned away again to stare off into the distance. He'd never been a religious man. Never thought beyond this life, what was here and now and could be seen, felt, heard, or tasted. Yet for an instant, he caught a glimpse of something eternal, of an emotion besides fear or hate. Love had always seemed foolish. Dangerous, even. It made some men behave stupidly, and he'd not once been tempted by it. Loyalty was a far nobler emotion, that sense of connection to a place or person that bade him fight fiercely to keep it safe.

But now, with Lady Gillian, he could see why some men would fight for a woman when she had no lands to win, nothing but her person. There was more to this lady than just her beauty. Some indefinable virtue that intrigued and appalled him. He couldn't risk tender emotion, not in this world. Not when the loss of it may well destroy him.

Alex took a step back from her. She turned to look at him, eyes sorrowful and hopeful at the same time, and something inside him quivered. No. He didn't want this. Didn't want to feel anything that wasn't physical. Didn't want to feel this sudden intense need for her, the sound of her voice, a desire to see laughter in her eyes, the yearning to just hold her close and not let her go again. Utter recklessness to surrender to any kind of emotion, yet even as he thought that, he knew that somehow she'd touched a part of him that no woman ever had before.

No reason to it, no reason for it, other than an inexplicable capitulation.

And then she was in his arms, the sweet scent of her filling his world, the whisper of his name on her lips the sweetest sound he'd ever heard, and he kissed her tenderly on the lips, her closed eyelids, the lovely curve of her cheek...and he knew that he'd never want any more from life than this.

They found a secluded corner, an alcove of the keep that was quiet and private this time of the evening, and they sat

upon stuffed cushions padding the stone ledge in front of a window that looked out over the Black Ravine. Deep shadows hid the trees and brush, and in the distance the pink and purple light had deepened to dusk. Velvet curtains hid them from view, muffled any sound from beyond, shrouded them in silence save their own whispers.

Gillian told him of her loneliness and years of emptiness, how she'd longed for someone to cherish her, of crushing disappointments, and he thought how brave she was for standing up to the English who'd killed her husband. She'd not cowered but met them in the hall, invoking right and privilege for herself and her household, until the commander had allowed them all to leave unmolested. An amazing feat. He held her hands, pressing them as if to give her strength when it was far too late to undo what had been already done.

She leaned into him, put her head against his shoulder, and after a moment of shared silence, she put her face up to be kissed. It seemed the most natural thing in the world, and felt as if he shared something precious.

He should have known, and maybe he had, but after a few minutes, kissing wasn't enough for either of them. Leaning into her, touching her, his weight pressed her back into the cushions. She felt so good beneath him, her skin smelling of lavender, her hair soft and silky between his fingers, the rise of her breasts above the bodice of her gown a temptation he couldn't resist.

Somehow he was lying atop her, his plaide up, his hand beneath the heavy folds of her skirt, skimming over smooth flesh to find the vee between her thighs. She shuddered when he brushed his hand over the damp cleft, then found the nubbin that gave her such pleasure. A cool breeze whispered over them from the open window, smelling of summer, heat leached from the air by long hours of dusk. Gillian shivered, and he kissed her lush open lips again.

Magic... it felt like magic to be with her like this, to feel this unexpected, unfamiliar tenderness that was almost overwhelming.

He deepened the kiss, tasting the sweetness of her mouth,

all his senses heightened to an intensity he'd never experienced before. Everything seemed sweeter, deeper, richer, and the very air shimmered with promise. She made him feel things he'd never felt before, feel them in ways he'd never dreamed existed, and he didn't want to pause to examine all the reasons for it. He'd never been the kind of man for introspection like some, been a man more accustomed to action than long nights before the fire discussing philosophy and theology with companions. Once, perhaps, he would have been that man. But that privilege had been taken from him by the necessity for survival.

Yet even survival was forgotten in the sweet delight of the moment.

Gillian arched up into his hand, her hips thrusting against his fingers as they slid wetly over her crevice, stroking her, teasing the tiny nub until she cried out and he knew she'd found release. Slowly, he stroked back the hair from her eyes, held her shuddering body until she grew quiet, inhaling the musky scent of her, the sweet fragrance she wore mixing with the exciting scent of a passionate woman. It was heady, arousing.

After a moment, he began to caress her again, fingers sliding over satiny smooth skin until she sighed with pleasure.

"Alex...how can something so sinful feel so wonderful?"

"God has a perverse sense of humor, perhaps."

She laughed, throatily, arching into his caress. Then her hand reached beneath his plaide and found him, fingers circling his hard length, rubbing over him as he throbbed against her cool hand. The sensitive head of his cock pushed hard into her palm, and he closed his eyes and groaned, a deep sound low in the back of his throat.

"You weep for me, Sir Alex," she whispered against his ear, and he thrust more fiercely, sliding slickly into her grasp. Erotic shudders rippled through him, and he gave himself over to the exquisite sensation, forgetting everything but the moment.

Rubbing him, Gillian delighted in his response. It thrilled her to know she could elicit such strong reactions with her touch. Teasing him, she brushed her fingertips over him in

light, feathery caresses, then more firmly, reveling in the way he pushed into her hand in a silent demand for more. Then she slid her free hand under him, cupping his stones in her palm in a soft caress that made him groan. His sac tightened, his erection hardened, and he nudged her legs apart with his knees, his weight pushing her deep into the cushions as he lifted himself over her.

Lunging forward, he slid inside her so swiftly she had no time to prepare. Her body closed around him greedily, stretched to accommodate his length, vibrations rippling through her when he pushed still deeper. Tension heightened, expanded, and he slid his hands beneath her hips to lift her slightly. Her fingers curled around his upper arms and she held on as he rocked forward, filling her completely. Raking her hands down his back, she scored him with her nails as she eagerly met his thrusts, crying out her need in his ear until he muffled her cries with his mouth, a hot, fierce kiss that stole her breath.

It was over quickly, the explosion fierce and high and hot, washing over her in exquisite tides that left her limp and breathless. Before the waves receded, he pulled free of her, his turgid cock wet and still ready. She sighed softly.

"No, we're not quite done yet, sweet lady," he murmured, and she looked down at him with wonder.

It was slightly embarrassing that she'd been so wanton and he hadn't lost control, but then he eased her up from the cushions and turned her around, his hands on her making her forget.

Darkness yawned beyond the alcove, sweet night air soft and bird calls melodic, their bower a secluded refuge. Alex caressed her quivering thighs, pressed small kisses on her bare flesh, slid his hands under her to pull down the bodice of her gown and tease her swollen nipples. They formed taut buds at his touch, tiny points of arousal that he ministered to until she began to squirm and a slow, heavy pulse throb between her thighs again. She lifted her hips in invitation and he accepted, sliding forward so that his cock scraped across the sensitive folds of flesh between her legs. Her thighs closed around him, and she rocked backward, movements growing frantic as she

sought release. When it came, Alex quickly slid inside her again, slamming into her body as she convulsed around him in climax, so that she buried her face into the velvet cushions to stifle her screams of ecstasy.

They collapsed together, spent, embracing with her tucked into the angle of his chest and thighs, his arms wound around her as she held onto him. These stolen moments were precious, even with the danger of discovery just beyond thin curtains. It would have to end one day, but not now. Hopefully, not for a long time.

For now, she held tightly to him and prayed that whatever fate was in store for them, it would be kind.

Five

They met often in the next weeks, stealing time and privacy where they could find it, not wanting to be noticed. Gillian could scarcely believe her own actions, but couldn't resist the emotions that welled up so strongly they were undeniable. It was more than just physical, though that lure drew her to him as if by an invisible chain. A glance across the crowded hall could leave her breathless, pulse racing, knees weak, and skin tingling as if he'd actually touched her. Never had she dreamed she could feel this way about anyone, especially not a man like Sir Alex.

He was no baron, naught but a knight in the service of the Bruce, loyal, and at times even savage, but nothing like she'd been brought up to believe of the kind of men from the western Highlands. There was a gentleness to him that he didn't often show to others, but she saw it in the way he touched her lightly, a soft caress, in the way he talked to children in the keep, or even cared for his horse. It showed her a side of him not many bothered to see. Especially Alyce.

"If you think yon worthy knight will be true to one woman," Alyse sidled up next to her to say as Gillian left the hall one evening, "you hope for the impossible. He tups every female he can."

Gillian turned to look at her. Torchlight spit and sputtered in sconces on the walls, and shadows shrouded the far end of the corridor. Alyse's eyes glittered in the torchlight. Her mouth turned down at the corners, and she stood with both hands on her hips.

"Are you speaking to me, perchance?" Gillian asked coolly.

"Yea, my lady fool, I am indeed."

"Be wary, Alyse, for your jealousy is evident."

"Jealous? Of you?" Alyse tossed her head and narrowed

her eyes. "Nay, my fine lady, I am not jealous of any other woman!"

Gillian just smiled, and Alyse glared at her. When she walked away, she felt Alyse's gaze on her, as pointed and sharp as daggers. It did not bode well.

Talk in the hall that night was of recent events. Since the battle at Methven, all the lowlands of Scotland had been cowed into submission by King Edward's harsh vengeance. Nothing and no one, regardless of rank, was spared as English troops raped, pillaged, and murdered at will with the king's sanction. For the past weeks, ever since barely escaping, Bruce and his men had hidden in the mountainous heather of Atholl so that stragglers from the battle could join them. Now he began to gather the remnants of his forces to him again. It was essential his women be brought under his protection, however great they might be endangered, because the danger was greater to leave them to Edward's mercy. So Bruce sent for the women—his wife, daughter, sister and attendants—to be brought to him.

Bruce's queen, Elizabeth, took the news calmly. Countess Buchan, Princess Marjorie, Gillian, and the king's sisters—Mary, who was wed to Bruce's comrade, Neil Campbell, and Christina, now twice-widowed by Edward's hand—steeled themselves for an arduous journey. It would be harrowing and dangerous, for they could scarcely pass unnoticed through the county when King Edward had many supporters and spies willing to betray their movements.

"Where can we go?" Gillian asked Alex on their last evening in Kildrummy. Her hands tightened on the stones of the parapet. A feeling of doom lowered with the purple evening shadows, and she tried to escape it. "It's dangerous to leave the safety of these walls."

"And more dangerous to stay. Longshanks will know Bruce's womenfolk are here and send forces to besiege the walls. Kildrummy is one of the safest keeps in Scotland, but any keep can be breached with enough time and treachery."

She turned to look at him in the fading light. "Treachery? You sound as if you expect it to happen."

He shook his head. "Nay, but 'tis always a risk. Things

happen. Greedy men will do too much to keep what they have. Only men who have nothing to lose will risk everything.”

“And you, Sir Alex?” She put a hand up to touch his jaw, fingers grazing the rough stubble of his half-grown beard. “What will you risk?”

A muscle flexed in his jaw and he looked past her, so that for a moment she thought he might not answer. Then he looked back at her, with the wind blowing back the hair from his face and dying daylight a pale gleam in his eyes.

“I have nothing to risk. Save you.”

For a moment she couldn’t breathe. He’d said it so softly, almost as if he didn’t want her to hear him, but she had. And she felt the same. As if nothing mattered but being with him, but knowing he was near and she could see him, touch him, taste him...she’d not dreamed he may feel the same. Did he?

“Alex...”

He grabbed her wrists, held them tightly in his fists, eyes suddenly fierce in the waning light. “I’d risk everything for you, Gillian. Curse it all, I don’t know how or why, but you mean more to me than life itself.”

Leaning into him, she murmured, “Oh my heart...I love you so.”

He didn’t say the words, but he held her to him so tightly she knew he felt the same. And it was enough for now.

* * * *

Morning broke, and as they left the safety of Kildrummy for the uncertainty of Aberdeen, Gillian cast a glance back at the castle. Illuminated by the light of the rising sun, it reminded her that she’d found love where most unexpected, and perhaps all would be well after all. It was a hope she intended to nourish.

Three days into the journey, a small band of Edward’s men stumbled across them just before daylight. The fight was swift and intense. Flames from a slumbering campfire ate across sheaves of grass, smoke boiled upward and the camp collapsed into confusion. Tents caught on fire, women and children screamed, horses panicked and men shouted as the clash of swords rang loud and deadly over all. Gillian’s heart pounded with fear.

Alex had rolled to his feet at the first sound and pulled her up with him. Neither had taken off any garments, save for their shoes. Gillian couldn't find hers in the dim light but there was no time to search.

"Gillian, go with the queen," Alex said in her ear, and led her to the line of trees where the horses were tied and men worked to free them for the women and children. "You will be safe with the others."

"Alex—"

He kissed her fiercely, then disappeared into the battle.

Heart thudding, Gillian saw that the queen and two of her ladies had the children close and were being mounted on horses to be taken to safety. It was cool and her teeth chattered. The twigs and stones beneath her bare feet cut her skin. She glanced over her shoulder. Only a few yards away lay her cloak and shoes, beneath the tree where they'd slept.

"I must fetch my shoes and cloak," she said to one of the men holding the horses, "they are only over there."

He said gruffly, "Do not tarry, my lady. We dare not wait."

Cooking utensils had been knocked over, tents abandoned. Clothes lay strewn about. She grabbed her cloak and put on her shoes, then turned back to the trees and hesitated. There were so many...so many horses and men, all a blur so that she could only tell English from Scots by their shields. Uncertain, she looked around, and glimpsed the queen and ladies riding away. *No!*

Stumbling, she fell over a downed man, screamed when she saw his eyes stare sightlessly up at the sky. Blood smeared her hands. She screamed again, and when she pushed up and away from him, his nearly severed head bobbed as if nodding. Sobbing, panicked now, she shoved the loose hair from her eyes and looked around wildly. It was so dark. Smoke spread thick and black, choking her, and in the chaos she couldn't find her way. Red and black all around, blood and fire, clouds of smoke....

Paralyzed by fear and confusion, she stood clutching her cloak to her chest. She felt faint and terrified. Finally she forced her feet to move forward, but only to find herself blocked by

men locked in mortal combat. She stopped, turned, and ran in the opposite direction. Terror lent her strength, but nothing looked familiar. The ground shook with the pounding of hooves and fierce fighting all around her. Metal clashed, men screamed, horses bellowed. A mounted Englishman rode toward her, his eyes glittering behind the nose guard of his conical helmet, sword held high. She looked around wildly but saw no escape. If she was to die, it would not be as a coward.

Chin lifted, she squared her shoulders, said a prayer to the Blessed Virgin that she keep Alex safe, and looked the soldier in his eyes as she waited for his sword to end her life.

A Gaelic curse rose above the pandemonium, and Alex ran toward her out of the hellish smoke, backlit by flame, a bloodied sword in his hand. The English soldier turned his mount toward Alex and lifted his sword high to cut him down. Gillian screamed. In a blink of an eye, the rider was on the ground, sword and arm lying several feet away as Alex snagged the frantic horse's reins to stop its flight. Eyes wild, lather flecking nose and breast, the horse shied away before he brought it back around. Alex gave it a soothing word and swung atop, then turned the mount around to come close to her.

He looked down at her with a cocky grin and put out his hand. "Come wi' me, lass."

Gillian put up her hand to catch his. With the horse dancing and flames licking toward them, he leaned down and scooped her into his arms, and galloped from the fray. They crashed through trees and splashed across a small burn until the queen could be seen not far ahead. Alex reined the horse to a halt and slid to the ground, then put the reins into Gillian's hand.

"Flee with the queen. I'll join you soon."

"Stay with me," she cried, grabbing at him, but he only grinned again and ran back to rejoin the fighting, disappearing into trees wreathed in smoke and licking red tongues of flame. Heart in her throat, she joined the queen and ladies. She was safe, but what of Alex?

They rode on, guarded by a small band of men, riding over barren hills and into green dales. No one spoke. All waited for the sound of loved ones or pursuit.

At last, in the distance, horsemen could be seen riding after them. Gillian knew her heart couldn't be the only one in her throat as they watched to see if 'twould be Scot or English.

"The Bruce," Lady Buchan said suddenly. "I see his shield."

Relief made Gillian near giddy, and the queen smiled though tears of joy streaked her face. It seemed forever before the survivors of the brief battle joined them. There had been some losses, but far more inflicted upon the enemy.

Anxiously, Gillian looked Alex over for signs of injury, but he only grinned and took her by the hand. "'Tis but scratches, my love, not an arm lost."

She raised a brow. "You're covered in soot. I'd not know if you had all your parts or not."

His grin widened and he leaned close so no one else could hear. "I still have the most important parts, my love, as I shall prove to you later when we have a pallet of heather beneath our backs and the stars above."

"You are a mad Highland rogue, Alex Campbell."

"Aye. That I am, my lady."

* * * *

Aberdeen lay on Scotland's eastern coast, the town nudging against the North Sea. It was near dark when they arrived, fading light blending purple sky and the line of blue sea together as if stitched by a master hand. It'd been an exhausting journey with little rest and a sense of urgency overriding all, and Gillian stumbled as she dismounted. Countess Buchan caught her, a quick hand supporting her.

"Only a wee bit farther, Lady Gillian," she said briskly, and her smile was kind and as weary as Gillian felt, "and we can all rest safely."

"For a time."

"Aye," Lady Isabel agreed, "for a time. Pray we are successful in our quest, for I greatly fear that our enemies may yet thwart us."

It was a fear that was constantly in all their minds, whether remarked upon or not, for the English had been relentless in their pursuit of Robert Bruce, and would not hesitate to use

his womenfolk against him. It was, after all, war. Niceties were discarded on both sides.

Gillian nodded understanding, noting Lady Isabel's dark-circled eyes, the fatigue in her lovely face. They were all soul-weary, frightened, yet determined not to yield to weakness. Even the queen betrayed rare moments of fear, but more for her beloved husband and child than for herself.

None had made complaints on the journey, even the children unnaturally silent. There hadn't seemed to be any conversation suitable. It was as if a smothering cloak had been dropped upon the land, suffocating hope.

"There will be food and rest inside," Lady Buchan said kindly, and Gillian smiled.

"Yea, I yearn most for a soft seat that doesn't constantly jar my insides. It's been a rocky ride."

Laughing, Isabel accompanied her into the keep, where they found roasted meat, bannocks and ale waiting for them. A fire burned, welcome if too smoky. With her stomach quieted and a soft cushion beneath her, Gillian grew drowsy sitting near the warmth of the blaze, and struggled to keep her eyes open.

It was only when a strong arm circled her waist and another slid beneath her that she realized she must have fallen asleep, and jerked back. Alex laughed softly.

"You are like to fall into the logs, m'lady, if you are not removed."

Flushing, Gillian slid a glance toward the queen and her ladies, and saw Isabel smile and nod. *She knew*. That wasn't surprising, of course, as even at Kildrummy it was impossible to hide things for long, but it was a bit embarrassing to realize that everyone knew.

Alex leaned close to whisper in her ear, "'Tis well, lovely lady, that none disapprove."

Startled, she glanced up to meet his eyes. No one, save Lady Alyse, had expressed condemnation, it was true. Perhaps it wasn't because they had been discreet, but because there was a tacit approval. It was a novel thing, to feel a sense of freedom in the knowledge that her relationship with this rough

Highlander need no longer be hidden.

"Aye," she whispered ruefully to Alex, "it seems that our liaison is no longer private."

"Discreet, yea. Private—never. Come, sweet lady, and I shall escort you to a quieter spot where you may find rest."

The keep was crowded, and privacy nonexistent. Alex wrapped them both in his plaide and made a cushion of straw in a shadowed nook. It was safe here in his arms, held against the heated length of his body. His breath against her cheek in the dark alcove was a reminder that he would keep her safe. Gillian fell asleep almost instantly.

* * * *

Alex lay awake long into the night. Danger was real and close. Generations of a chivalric code meant nothing to this English king. Edward made it evident he intended to win no matter the cost or code. Never before had Alex felt such fear. Not for himself, but for the lovely lady at his side. Now he knew what it was to be crippled by emotion, by love for a woman that bade him do everything necessary to keep her safe, even against all odds. Even at peril of his own life.

Perhaps Bruce meant to embark from Aberdeen and seek aid from Norway. His eldest sister Isabel was Dowager Queen there, and would certainly offer safe harbor to the women at the least. It would be a relief to know they were safe, even if a great distance away.

It seemed that his speculations were wrong, for after meeting with the Bishop of Moray, the bishop left for the Orkneys that belonged to Norway, and Bruce and his womenfolk and a force of near five hundred men struck east to the mountainous region that lay on the borders of Perthshire and Argyll. Word had come that the Earl of Pembroke was advancing toward them, and Bruce meant to reach the Western Isles and his old friends, the Macdonalds of Islay. It was a long and arduous journey with the women's comfort to be heeded, and danger at their backs.

By early August they had reached Tyndrum at the head of Strathfillan beyond Loch Tay, and camped near the shrine of St. Fillan of Glenlochart. Bruce had a purpose for the visit to

the tomb of the Irish saint, it seemed. He had come to ask absolution from the Abbot of Inchafray for desecrating Greyfriars Kirk with the murder of Red Comyn. With his army gathered around him, he knelt to receive the abbot's blessing for all to hear.

There, on a clear day with the blue sky above and the ancient stones of St Fillan's Priory behind them, Robert Bruce knelt on a green slope as the abbot intoned the rites of absolution. For the superstitious among them, it reaffirmed their faith in Bruce and their cause. The mood after was lighter and more confident, as they camped on the hillsides near the River Fillan.

For Alex Campbell, the time and place provided opportunity. Taking Lady Gillian by the hand, he asked her if she would wed him, not knowing what the answer would be but hoping for the best. For a long moment, she gazed at him, her amber eyes reflecting emotional turmoil. Then she nodded.

"Yea, Sir Alex, I will wed thee," she whispered, and he folded her hands between his larger ones and smiled.

"There is little time, my love. The abbot must waive the banns. We dare not tarry here too long, for our enemies are always close behind." He pulled her to him, breathing in the scent of her hair that still smelled sweet even after days of dust and travel. Never had he thought to wed, not even his first love so long ago when he'd been a youth still foolish enough to dream.

In the distance rose Ben Lui, a towering crag that cast a long shadow over the stream and glen cloaked in heather. Broad swathes of purple ended in brown folds of rising hills that seemed to touch the sky. To marry on the steps of the priory would be a lovely memory.

"I must request permission from the Bruce, as he is my new overlord," he said, "but I do not think he will deny us."

Robert Bruce smiled slightly, his gaze moving from Alex to Gillian and back. "She is the daughter of the Earl of Wakefield, and the widow of David Montgomery, is she not?"

"Aye, sire. Now she is the queen's lady in waiting. We ask your permission to wed before leaving the priory, if the abbot

will agree.”

“And you, Lady Gillian? You wish to wed Sir Alex?”

“Yea, sire, I do.” She looked up to meet his eyes, and her hand found Alex’s as if for reassurance. He squeezed it lightly, and saw that Bruce had noticed the gesture, for he smiled.

“I give it gladly, but the wedding night will not be what it should. We must leave early on the morrow. The Lord of Lorne has learned of our presence on his lands, and it is dangerous to delay.”

Lorne was a son-in-law of the murdered Red Comyn, and would avenge his kinsman’s death at Bruce’s hands. He would be determined in a pursuit to the death, for the rewards would be twofold: King Edward’s gratitude, and the satisfaction of vengeance.

Alex left Gillian in the queen’s tent and approached the abbot near St Fillan’s well. It was said to have remarkable curative powers since being blessed by the saint. Inside the priory ruins, relics were carefully kept and revered, the saints left arm and hand that had lit up a room so he might read in the darkness, and the crozier of the staff he carried, and a bell that was said to have come to him when he called. These relics were sacred to all of Scotland, making the abbot’s position even more powerful.

To his chagrin, the abbot refused to conduct the ceremony or allow a marriage to take place at the priory. “I am sorry, my son, but banns must be posted and permission granted from the bride’s family.”

“The bride’s family is unavailable. Permission has been given by the king.”

Still, the abbot would not consent. Angry, Alex stormed away, stalking up the hillside to cool his temper on an outcropping of rocks that overlooked a waterfall. There had been censure in the abbot’s eyes when he looked at him, as if he knew a knight was not good enough to wed a lady like Gillian. He was reaching above himself. Tossing a pebble into the water tumbling over the rocks, he grudgingly thought that he agreed with the abbot. She was too far above his rank, and in all other ways. He was aspiring to heights he should not

dare. A bitterness burned in the back of his throat.

He'd been a fool. Caught up in what he wanted, he hadn't thought that the daughter of an earl would be unsuitable for the son of a laird. Not even a son who had been knighted by Bruce himself. War may have turned Scotland upside down, but it had not erased the class differences.

In the distance could be heard the noise of the camp, but here above the waterfall he heard only the shattering of his dream. Now he knew why he'd not allowed himself to be vulnerable. It tasted like ashes in his mouth to see hope slip away.

Six

Gillian found him above the waterfall. Evening light had dwindled to purple shadows. Soon it would be dark by this time of evening, the long winter nights ahead spent inside by the warm fire. Perhaps wrapped in her blankets with her husband...

"Alex?" She knelt beside him, saw from the expression on his face that all was not well. She had half-expected this. "Tell me—did the abbot refuse permission?"

"Aye." He glanced at her sideways, his mouth twisting as he said wryly, "He made it plain that a man such as myself should not look so far above his station."

"He said that?"

"Nay, he did not have to say it. I understood what he meant. Gillian—my lady—it pains me to admit it, but he's right. I should never have—"

"Don't you dare say it," she said so fiercely that he gave her a sharp look, "don't you dare say we are not meant to be together!"

"Lady Gillian—"

"I mean it, Alex Campbell, do not utter those words! For the first time in my life I have found love, and I do not mean to let you go without a fight. If you think King Edward is a fierce adversary, you will find me even more so."

For a long moment he just looked at her, then a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth and he opened his arms. She leaned into him with a sigh of relief as he nuzzled her hair. "I do not deserve you, my sweet lady. I have nothing to recommend me but my heart."

"That is more than enough for me. Wherever you are, there will I also be, whether in the finest castle or the meanest cottage, it matters not to me."

"I greatly fear the last is more likely than the first," he said ruefully, tipping her face up to look her in the eyes. "If we lose Scotland to Edward, prison or death will be our reward. I do

not wish that for you.”

“Nor I for you. But I do not wish to stay in a world without you.”

“Then I had best make certain we win this war against Edward, I see.”

“Yea, so you should.” She smiled, and he took her hands between his and leaned forward to kiss her lips. The gentle kiss swiftly became demanding and urgent, and she responded as if their time together may indeed be short.

“Come with me,” he lifted his head to say huskily, “where we are not so easily seen.”

They picked their way down the steep slope beside the waterfalls, ducking beneath the branches of bay willows that grew in the shallow waters. Tussocks of moss that had gone from green to yellow made a soft cushion. Water slid and tumbled over rocks down the steep slopes, joining with a stream that ran into the river. More trees lined the stream, a barricade against prying eyes.

Lowering her to the cushion of bog moss, Alex held her gaze, his eyes burning into her as if he intended to memorize her features, as if he would never see her again, and Gillian’s heart lurched. “You will never leave me, my love, say you will not,” she whispered, and he brushed back the hair from her eyes.

“Never willingly, my lady love. Should miles ever part us, I will always be with you here, in your heart and memories.” He lay his palm gently on her breast.

Tears sprang to her eyes, and she gripped him so tightly her fingers ached from it. “Time and distance may come between us, but never doubt that we will be together again. For all time, for all eternity.”

“Yea, my lady love,” he murmured, “for all eternity.”

Kissing her mouth, her cheek, the arch of her throat, his lips moved like flames down to her breasts. Cool air feathered lightly over them when he pulled down her bodice, but she was warmed by the heat of his mouth, the hot rush of blood through her veins, and the steady drumming of sweet tension he aroused with his lips and hands. Aching precious were

these stolen moments, made more so by the knowledge that their time together was almost certain to be short. He would have to go fight, and she would have to remain behind. Since time began it had been this way, men marching off to war and leaving behind weeping wives, loves, and families...perhaps one day there would be no need for war, but for now that was only a dream. For now, she had to make the most of her time with Alex.

With his hands cupping her breasts he dragged his tongue around the tight peaks before he closed his lips and drew first one, then the other into his mouth, a steady suction that made her stomach knot. Delicious fever spread through her entire body. Writhing beneath him, she arched her back and lifted her hips, a silent invitation that he ignored. Teasing her breasts with his lips and hand, he slid his free hand beneath her skirts to caress the tiny nub that gave her so much pleasure. Faster, as tension stretched so tightly she thought she may explode, he rubbed her until finally release shattered like a white-hot star coursing through her entire body.

“Nay,” he said softly when she roused and reached for him again, “we have the rest of the day to ourselves. Come.”

As purple shadows deepened on the hills around them, he coaxed her into the waterfalls. The water was cold, splashing around them, and she squealed like a small child when he pulled her into the shallow pool that fed into the stream. Spitting out geysers of water, she laughed as he caught her beneath the arms.

“Can you swim, m’lady?”

“No, but that is why there are boats.” Wiping water from her eyes, she blinked at him. “If you intend to drown me, you’ll need deeper water than this.”

“I’ll not drown you, lass, for ‘tis said that witches float.”

Gillian promptly splashed water in his face, then leaped atop him and tried to duck him beneath the water. Spluttering and floundering, he choked out, “I yield, I yield!”

“Take it back, you Highland rogue. Say that you never called me a witch.”

Before he could speak, she ducked him again, and when

he came up this time, he caught her around the waist. Holding her tight he said, "You know I only jested, for there is none fairer or more beauteous than you, my lady. Your hair is like silk, your eyes like gold coins, your teeth like pearls, your skin—"

"Continue and I'll duck you again," she warned, laughing at their play.

He grinned at her, and with his dark hair plastered to his head and his eyes alight with laughter, he was so handsome that her heart lurched. A comely man, indeed, strong yet so tender at times he made her ache with love for him.

"You are," he said, "a most fierce adversary. I see that I shall have to be cautious."

"Indeed." She put her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist as he held her. Shivering at the cool wind over her wet body, she snuggled closer.

"I'd best warm you before you take sick," he said, and took her to the banks where their clothes lay airing on bushes. He sat her upon a tussock and dried her briskly with his plaide, until she complained that he was rubbing away a layer of skin. "That would be a hanging offense," he murmured, and pressed a kiss upon the pulse at her wrist.

Gillian grew still, and he wrapped his plaide around her shoulders as he knelt in front of her, clad only in what God had given him. Broad chest, strong arms, sinews and muscles defined by faint light, gleamed wetly. A fine man, yea, a fine man indeed.

His hands moved to her thighs to spread them gently apart, and she drew in a sharp breath as he slid his fingers over her skin to touch her between the legs. He bent to press a kiss upon her knee, then higher up her thigh. His lips were hot against her chilled flesh, searing her like flames. Then to her shock he slid his hands beneath her hips to lift her slightly for his tongue. It flickered over her in a caress that made her moan, and she held her breath as he moved ever closer to the tiny nub at the top of her crevice. His lips closed around it and he drew it into his mouth, and her entire body shuddered.

It was wicked...it had to be, for nothing that felt this good

could be anything else but a sin. Her hands clenched into the wool plaide and the breath locked in her lungs. Alex's tongue flicked against her again and again, until her entire body convulsed and she cried out his name. Nothing had ever felt like this, nor had she imagined it could. Panting for breath, she collapsed atop the tussock, and barely felt him come to lie beside her, wrapping them both in the plaide.

Cradling her as she slowly drifted back from the heights, Alex began again to arouse her with his hands and mouth, taking his time. As tension began to build again, she grew more bold. She slid her hand under the plaide and found him hard and ready for her. Her fingers plied along the turgid length of his shaft, gently at first, then with firmer strokes until she could tell from his ragged breathing that he was as ready as she. Spreading her thighs wide, she lifted her hips so the velvety soft head of his shaft rested against her.

"Now, my love," she murmured against his ear, and he slid into her with exquisitely deliberate slowness so that she felt every inch of him filling her, rubbing against her tight heat until he filled her completely. Then he began to move, withdrawing slightly only to plunge forward again so that it seemed as if he went even deeper with each stroke, in and out as she held tightly to his arms. The drag and thrust of his hard cock inside her quickly brought her to the very point of release again, and she hovered there for only a moment before he went so deep inside her it felt like they were one person, one body, joined forever...

Trembling, she held tightly to him, unable to let him go for even a moment, wanting him like this for as long as she could, and after the briefest resistance, he gave a last deep thrust and went still. Instead of pulling out quickly as he always did, he waited too late. Groaning, he rested his head beside hers, muttering, "Sweet love...I did not mean...I should have stopped..."

"It's all right." Gillian pressed her lips to the bare skin of his shoulder. "'Twill be all right, my love." She prayed she spoke the truth.

* * * *

Early the next morn, the camp broke up and started for the Dalry pass. It was a narrow defile that barely allowed a single horseman through at a time, with rocks rising high on each side. It happened so suddenly that Alex had time only for reaction. Half-naked Highlanders swooped down from the slopes on both sides, slashing with long Lochaber axes at the bellies and undersides of the horses and bringing many down. Screams of wounded men and horses filled the air and the ground soaked up the blood of the slain. Bruce shouted the order for retreat and they withdrew, gathering around the king and all circling about the women to protect them.

“Lodge the women in yon small castle on the isle in Loch Dochart,” Bruce ordered, “for if we make a stand here, we’re likely to lose most of our horses and be at their mercy.”

Wounded in the fray, James Douglas said grimly, “‘Tis the Macdougall clan with Lorne, and I saw a few of the MacIndrosser clan with him as well.”

“Lorne is determined to bring our heads to Edward however he can. We must get the women to safety,” Bruce replied.

The route to the isle in Loch Dochart lay along a narrow track that ran between a steep hillside and the deep waters of the loch. Marshaling the women ahead of them, they managed to go at a fast pace, while Bruce and a few men remained at the rear to face the pursuing forces that caught up with them before they reached the loch. It was a fierce fight. Again and again the Highlanders under Lord Lorne attacked, but were kept at bay. In desperation and anger, Lorne sent three men to ambush Bruce at a place where the loch and the rock cliff came so close that a horse could barely turn.

Alex saw them and shouted a warning, but from his position could only watch as they leaped upon Bruce when he passed beneath the rocks where they waited. One seized his bridle, but Bruce cut his arm and shoulder from his body. The other two jumped on him, but the king fought so viciously they could not prevail, and were cut down. When the others who pursued him saw Bruce’s valiant feat of arms, they were afraid to follow any longer, and he was able to join the others waiting ahead.

Even though they had saved some horses and men, the

losses had been enough that Bruce knew the risks to the women were too great to continue on with them. The only route to the west was blocked by his enemies, so he altered his previous plans. He handed over all the surviving horses to his brother Nigel and the Earl of Atholl, and bade them escort the queen and her companions with as many men as could be mounted back to Kildrummy Castle. Once the women had time to recover from their exhausting journey, they were to rejoin the Bishop of Moray in the Orkneys, while Nigel was to fortify and defend the castle against the approaching English to hold them in check as long as possible.

“And I will take the other men to the heather with me to bypass my foes to the south,” he said wearily, and looked up at the somber men gathered around him. Most were bloodstained and grime-caked, as was he. The situation was dire, and all knew it far too well.

Alex did his best to allay Gillian’s fears, knowing that to sow seeds of doubt could well alarm all the women and make them more susceptible to panic. He should have known she’d see through his efforts.

Searching his face with her amber eyes, she nodded slowly. “I understand. Will you travel to Kildrummy with us, or must I part with you here?”

“I’m to go with you as far as Kildrummy, then I’m to leave there and see what I can find out about Edward’s movements. It’ll only be for a little while,” he added when her eyes widened, “then I’ll join you before you leave with the bishop.”

“Yea,” she said in a faint voice, “I’ll pray for that.”

“Gillian, sweet love—it’s only for a little while.”

She leaned forward to press her face against his chest. “If only I could believe that. But I feel...I don’t know, I feel somehow as if the fates are against us. Oh Alex—I cannot live without you!”

He hugged her tightly, his throat closing. “Don’t say that,” he managed to get out gruffly, “for we must be parted for a time. But not forever. Never that. Life could not be so cruel.”

“I want to think that, but I look around and I see just how cruel life truly is, dead children and the elderly—lands wasted,

the earth scorched where nothing can live on it. And I have to wonder, is it worth it? The fighting, the killing...is it worth it in the end? Is it worth losing all that you love to win?"

For a moment he could not answer. Never before had he had anything to lose so he'd not pondered these questions, but now he feared her loss more than anything he could ever have imagined. "Nay," he said slowly, "nothing would be worth losing you, not even Scotland."

She smiled. "I know you don't truly mean that, but 'tis nice to hear."

He clasped her hands tightly. "But I do mean it. God help me, I do. Never have I felt like this about a woman, not even Mary."

Her brow lifted. "Mary?"

Grinning, he said, "Aye, I was near ten and she lived across the braes, a fair lass with hair as red as an autumn apple. I swore to marry her one day, but she loved another. Near broke my heart."

"And that is when you swore off women?"

"Aye. Fickle creatures. All save you."

She put up her hand to touch the cut upon his face. He'd forgotten about it, a token of the battle just past. "It needs tending," she murmured. "Come with me. I'll see to your hurts."

Taking her hand in his, he jested, "That is not all that needs tending, my fair lady."

That summoned another smile from her, but it lacked real amusement. He wanted to reassure her, to swear that all would be well, but she would recognize the promise for what it was and know better: Only hope.

Parting was poignant, Bruce bidding his queen and their twelve-year old daughter a stoic yet sorrowful farewell, not knowing if they would ever see one another again. They left then, with Robert Bruce watching from the hillside as the little group of women and their cavalcade of mounted men disappeared beyond the loch.

It was an arduous journey through the mountains of Atholl and Braemar all the way to the castle on Deeside. Nigel Bruce did his best to entertain them with jests and wry comments,

but for the most part, they were a solemn group. Nights had grown colder, and Alex lay wrapped in a blanket with Gillian, both too numb from cold and desolation to do more than hug each other all during the night hours. Days had grown shorter, the month of August gone and September new when they reached Kildrummy at last.

The familiar walls rose starkly against the cloudy sky, rain threatening to turn the grounds to mud when the bridge was lowered and they crossed into the bailey. Men ran to take their horses and Alex helped Gillian down himself, taking the opportunity to hold her close.

“We’re here,” she murmured in relief, “safe at last.”

“Aye, Kildrummy is the most formidable castle in Scotland, well-provisioned and able to fight even a long siege if necessary. You’ll be safe here, my love, until time to join the bishop.”

Curling her fingers into his plaide, she looked up into his eyes. “Will you come for me? When this is all over, when ‘tis safe for you to travel—will you meet me, Alex?”

“Yea, love, wherever you are, however distant you are, I will find you and meet you, if it takes an eternity.”

She lay her cheek against his chest. “It might, you know. The war goes on so long, and it seems as if ‘twill never end.”

“No matter. I will come for you, I swear it.”

“I believe you. I’ll wait for you.”

“When this is over and we are together again, we’ll wed in the little kirk on my father’s land. It will be mine again, and after we’re wed we’ll live in my keep that overlooks Loch Leven. It’s a small keep, but beautiful.”

“Ey there, look about now,” a rough voice said, and Alex turned as the blacksmith of the keep gestured at him to move. “Ye’re in me way.”

“There’s no hurry, Osborne,” Alex said coldly. “The horses will be here a while.”

“Aye, but me supper willna stay. Nor yours, I warrant.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to sharply rebuke the blacksmith for being rude to a lady, but a look at Gillian’s exhausted face changed his mind. With his arm around her shoulders, he escorted her into the castle hall, where a bright

fire burned a welcome and the tempting fragrance of roast meat and hot bread made his stomach growl.

The long trestle table was quickly loaded with trenchers of meat and platters of bannocks. Pitchers of ale were passed along the benches to fill eager cups. Heated by the fire and bellies full at last, most quickly found their pallets or rolled up in blankets along the walls. The queen and her ladies retired to her chamber, but Gillian remained with Alex.

Drowsy, she rested her head on his shoulder and watched logs burn, squinting slightly at the acrid smoke curling up to the high ceiling. Alex held her against him, content to allow her to sleep in his arms. Even Alyse had ceased her bitter comments now, exhausted as the rest and no longer seeming to care.

Perhaps he would have slept there near the fire all night with Gillian, but Nigel Bruce sent a summons to the solar. Easing Gillian down to sleep wrapped in a blanket, he joined the men, and saw from their faces that the news was not good.

"The Earl of Pembroke is already in Aberdeen with his troops. He awaits only the arrival of the Prince of Wales and his army with their siege engines to attack Kildrummy. We dare not let the queen and her ladies linger. They must leave before first light in the morn. Atholl will take a few of his men and see them to the Orkneys by way of Dornoch Firth."

"But that is in Easter Ross," Alex said with a frown, and Nigel nodded.

"Aye, so 'tis, but they can take a ship from there to the Orkneys."

"The Earl of Ross supports the Comyns. If he learns of their presence, he may well take them hostage. Edward will use them harshly, I fear."

"Then it is up to Atholl not to be caught," Nigel said simply. "It is their only hope."

All the men were silent for a few minutes, as the danger to the women was too great to allow them to stay at Kildrummy, but still great for them to journey over a hundred miles without an army at their side. Yet it must be done. There was no alternative.

It was near midnight when Alex returned to where Gillian slept still in her blankets, rolled up like a child, her hands clasped and cushioned beneath her cheek. He watched her for a long time without waking her, lost in admiration of her fair skin, parted lips, even the heart-shaped curve to her ear...when he could wait no more, he lifted a strand of her golden hair, dusty now from their travels but still soft and silky in his palm. She woke slowly, blinking her long lashes then smiling when she saw him.

"Is't morn already?"

"Nay, my love. I'm being selfish. Our time here together is very short, I fear, as you must leave before daylight."

Her eyes widened, catching the light from the fire and gleaming. "*Nay*...so soon? But why must we part so soon?"

"It is too dangerous for the queen and her ladies to stay." He told her of the earl awaiting the prince in Aberdeen, so close to the castle, and that they must flee for their own safety, then he held her while she wept. "Dinna greet, lass," he finally got out though his own throat felt thick, and his voice came out rough with the Highland burr of his youth. "Dinna greet..."

Yet still she wept, and he held her close until finally she stopped, shuddering. After wiping away her tears, he lifted her face with a finger beneath her chin. "Shall we find a quiet place to say our farewells in privacy?"

She nodded, and he stood, pulling her up with him. They picked their way around the sleeping forms scattered through the hall. Cold shadows lay behind torchlight and the warmth of the fire, and he guided her out of the hall and across the bailey to the small alcove behind the blacksmith's forge. It was warm there, though it had only straw for a bed, and he spread out his plaid for a blanket. Clad in only his sherte and trews, he lowered Gillian to the pallet and lay beside her. It would be their last night together, perhaps for a long time. There was so much he wanted to say, but words failed him. They'd said it all, it seemed.

Silently, they undressed each other in the close warmth of the fragrant alcove. Red-hot coals smoldered in the forge, providing heat and light. Without preliminaries, both too

impatient to wait, he took her quickly, plunging his cock inside her warm, damp core as she eagerly wrapped her legs around him and lifted her hips for each thrust. Release came swiftly for both of them, yet left them wanting more.

Slower now, he kissed her brow, her temples, her closed eyes, then grazed her lips lightly. Moving down, his tongue washed over skin still dusty from their journey. A faint fragrance teased him, familiar and so sweet, the scent of her skin smelling still of heather. He had given her a spray to tuck into her hair on their journey, as they passed hills thick with it in bloom. A token, he said, when what he wanted to give her were jewels and fine furs instead. It was little enough to share, but she'd taken the heather as if the grandest gift in the world, smiling at him with such love in her eyes he'd been tongue-tied.

Now, knowing they were to part, he said the words that had always been so hard for him to say, even with her. "Lady mine," he whispered against her ear, "I love you more than life."

She took his face between her palms, tears shining in her eyes. "As I do you."

"Stay wi' me, lass," he said huskily, knowing she could not but unable to still the plea, "stay wi' me."

"Always. I will never leave you, no matter how far apart we may be. Until we are together again."

He would carry that with him through the days to come, a beacon of hope that never died.

* * * *

"Stay here with me, lass."

Husky with passion, his voice in her ear made her heart leap. She couldn't speak, could only reach for him, body rising to meet his in the thick dark night shadows that enveloped them. Never enough time, never enough privacy, only moments stolen together...raw emotion filled her with a sense of overwhelming urgency.

Reaching for him, she slid her hands down his body and found him hard and ready for her. Fingers curled around the turgid length, caressed him until she heard his groan in her ear and knew he was impatient for her. As she was for him.

“Yes, my heart,” she whispered when he asked if she loved him, “for all eternity.”

His hands were on her breasts, teasing her nipples into rigid aching points and setting her thighs aflame with need, and she parted her legs eagerly when he nudged her knees apart. Then he was there, sliding inside her, a swift thrust that sent shivers of ecstasy rippling through her.

Clinging to him, she arched her hips to take him all as tension tightened, awareness of imminent danger only making the moment more intense. Shadows hid the world for now, but they would lift soon enough and she'd have this moment to remember forever...

Seven

A sense of urgency drove the Earl of Atholl onward. They all felt it. With scant rest and even less sleep, Bruce's queen, his sisters, his daughter Marjorie, and the Countess of Buchan did their best to show no fear or weariness. Gillian remained stoic as well, though she wondered if her face reflected her exhaustion. Perhaps she was just too weary to be afraid. She had no notion of how many days or nights they'd been traveling, as they all seemed to blend one into the other. Perhaps they were near their destination, for it seemed the air had turned salty, and she was sure she'd heard seabirds.

"We must be close," Isabel, Countess of Buchan said encouragingly, "and then we shall be safely on the ships. It cannot be far now. I see smoke from the chimneys." While she spoke mostly to the queen's twelve-year old daughter Marjorie, all felt better at her reassurance.

The sun had come out to warm the day, and the hills undulated toward the sea. Close, so close. It may yet be safe soon. Gillian even allowed herself to dream of Alex, not as she'd last seen him, lit by the wall torches outside the gates, watching as they rode away, but as she'd seen him in the light of smoldering coals on their last night together. When he'd said he loved her, there had been such a look in his eyes she knew she'd never forget it. Even had he not said it aloud, she'd have known it. It made everything bearable. And later, they had sworn again to find one another when it was safe, when they could be together for the rest of their lives. That day must surely come, for how could it not?

With the warmth of the sun on her face and the wind brisk but not too cold, she rode in a pleasant reverie of the days when they'd be together again.

Then the Earl of Atholl raised a sudden alarm. A party of mounted riders came at a swift pace over the hill behind them,

and it was apparent they had not come as friends.

“Ride,” he shouted, “as fast as you can!” The earl and his men turned to make a barrier to give them time to escape.

Smoke smudged the sky, and a thin silver line of sea ahead gave direction as they all rode swiftly toward the village. They’d almost reached Tain on the shores of Dornoch Firth, and riding at the head, the Countess Buchan gestured for them to follow her. Gillian soon saw why, as the stone walls of a chapel came into view. *Sanctuary*.

Urging her horse faster, the gray stone walls seemed tantalizing close yet were still so far away, with the thunder of pursuit behind them, the clash of steel swords and shouts of men. Then it happened. Gillian’s mount stumbled and went down, and she sailed over its head to sprawl on the green hillside, dazed. The dark shape of her horse getting to its feet and racing away was a blurred image. She lay there only a moment before danger shrieked in her mind to get up and flee. Staggering to her feet, she felt the rumble of approaching hooves, heard distant shouts, and then a cool, clear voice: “Take my hand.”

Looking up, she saw Isabel, Countess of Buchan, leaning from her horse. Without delay, Gillian took her hand, and somehow her foot found the stirrup and she clung to the cantle of the saddle for dear life, half on, half off the horse. The jolting gait made it difficult, but she hung on until they reached the chapel.

The queen stood in the open doorway, beckoning them to hasten, and they barely made it inside before the earl and his men joined them, pulling closed the heavy chapel doors. Gillian could barely speak, struggling for breath, her heart pounding so furiously it felt like a fist inside her chest. It hurt to breathe.

Isabel helped her to a stone seat at one side of the chapel. Arched windows behind the altar let in light, and candles flickered on pedestals and in wall holders. Kneeling beside her, the countess asked, “Are you well? Did the fall break any bones?”

Gillian managed to shake her head, and when she was able to speak, she said, “I’m only bruised, but if you had not come

back for me—”

Smiling, Isabel said, “You would have done the same for me.”

“Still, if ever I can repay you, I shall.”

The countess rose to her feet. “I know you would.”

The earl strode toward them, and his face was grim. “We cannot tarry here long. I fear the brigands sent by Pembroke will not respect the sanctuary of St Duthac.”

Queen Elizabeth said sharply, “Surely they will not break sanctuary! This is the birthplace of the saint.”

Atholl turned to her. “With all due respect, the precedent was set at Greyfriar’s Kirk when your husband slew Red Comyn in the chapel.”

For a moment it was so still and silent the flicker of candles could be heard, then the earl went to one knee and bowed his head. “My pardon, your highness, I should not have been so bold as to speak to you like that.”

“Most unwise of you,” the queen replied coolly, “but forgivable under the circumstances. If we are not safe here, where shall we go?”

“In disguise, perhaps we can slip out in the night to the ships. There should be priests’ cowls that will—”

A heavy banging on the chapel doors interrupted him, and as if one, they all turned to stare at the buttressed doors. There was to be no time, no sanctuary, not even from a saint.

* * * *

Events passed in such a blur after they were seized and taken under guard to King Edward that Gillian could scarcely recall them all. Some things stood out stark and terrible in her memory and others were only vague memories. She vividly remembered seeing the ancient Roman wall that ambled across the border between Scotland and England just before they reached Lanercost, the English monastery where the king awaited his valuable prisoners. But the audience with the king remained lost to her, only the terrible aftermath.

The Earl of Atholl was to be hung, beheaded, then burned for his part in the rebellion against the English crown. Shocked by the sentence, Gillian reeled, suddenly afraid of her fate.

Isabel, Countess of Buchan, and Mary Bruce, sister to the Scottish king, received the brunt of Edward's displeasure. For them, Edward decreed that wooden cages should be built and hung from the battlements of Berwick and Roxburgh, and that the two ladies be incarcerated in each one for all to see, exposed to the gaze of those below like animals. The only concession to their modesty were privies within the walls, and they were to have no conversation with any but the English maidservants assigned to bring them food and drink. Worse, a similar cage was to be constructed for Marjorie and jut from the battlements at the Tower of London. Christina Bruce, the king's other sister, widowed by Edward when her husband had been hung, drawn and quartered, received leniency and was sent to a convent at Sixhills. The queen was the daughter of the Earl of Ulster, and as such, King Edward dared not offend her father, a noble most valuable to him. For her, the sentence was house arrest.

Gillian, too, was the daughter of an earl, and her sentence was to a nunnery in Lincoln. It made little difference to her, somehow, for the sentences of Isabel and Mary were so much worse she could scarcely comprehend them. Yet none of them wept or pleaded, all remained dignified and composed, and she could do no less. Escorted by their guards, they parted, and Gillian's last view of them remained stark and vivid in her memory.

* * * *

At Kildrummy, days passed and the siege dragged on. Nigel Bruce and the men with him beat off every attack, inflicting such loss on their enemies that they withdrew for a time. At day's end, Alex met Nigel on the parapets overlooking the Black Ravine.

"They will come again," Nigel said, and Alex nodded.

"Aye. They're up to trickery, no doubt. Or waiting for reinforcements."

Nigel nodded gloomily. He stared out over the ravine, at the thick, almost impenetrable tangle of vines and thorns, then looked back at Alex. "I have a task for you, one that is dangerous but necessary."

"You have only to ask, my lord."

A faint smile slanted Bruce's mouth, and in the thin moonlight, weariness was evident in his handsome face. "Yea, you are always willing, Sir Alex. Do you know the back way from the castle?"

"Through the ravine? Aye."

"Do you think it possible to get away undetected?"

"Possible, yea, my lord."

Bruce put a heavy hand on his shoulder. "I have a message for the king I wish you to take. It is brief."

"I will carry it to him, my lord, and keep it safe."

"I do not intend to write it down, Sir Alex. It is but a few words. Tell him...tell him that I have done my best, and that he will be the best king Scotland could ever know."

Alex stood still for a moment. It was a strange message, almost...prophetic. "Is that it, my lord?"

"That is it, Sir Alex. See, if you will, that he hears it."

Hesitating, Alex thought there was something almost defeated in his tone, but Nigel Bruce had never admitted defeat in his life. He must be mistaken, must be reading his own doubt into the words.

"I will leave before first light, my lord."

The Black Ravine was nearly inaccessible, but not impossible. Alex had once used a path through the thicket, and it came out far down the slope away from the castle. He would have no horse, but that could easily be remedied when he came across one.

That night, Osborne, the castle blacksmith, threw a red-hot ploughshare into the stored corn. It caught fire, and flames spread from the storage to wooden buildings in the bailey, so that the entire garrison was driven to the catwalk along the battlements. Alex wanted to stay, but Nigel Bruce insisted he leave as he'd promised.

"There is not much time. The castle gate is burning and the English will soon be upon us. Leave now, Sir Alex, or you will not be able to leave at all."

Torn, Alex yielded at last to the command, and made his way to the tiny portal that led to the ravine. Noise of battle lay behind him, and before him lay the dense shadows of night.

He slipped away unseen, barely escaping notice of an English troop skirting the castle to come up on the other side. All he could do now for those in Kildrummy was pray. He set his sights on finding the king, but it was over six months before he reached him.

* * * *

Robert Bruce listened intently to the final words to him from his brother. Alex knelt before him, exhausted, having gone from the Isles to Carrick and to the Isle of Arran but always just missing Bruce. Now that he'd found him in a cave in his ancestral lands of Carrick, he gave way to the weariness that had been a part of his life for so long.

"My queen," the king asked, "have you news of her, Sir Alex?"

"She and her ladies fled north with the Earl of Atholl, but I know nothing else, sire."

"And my brother Nigel? Thomas and Alexander? Have you word of them?"

"Nay, sire. No word of any, nor of my lady."

Silence greeted his reply, then Bruce rose wearily. "I shall pray that all our loved ones are well and safe, Sir Alex."

"Aye, as we all do, sire."

The next day, a former mistress of the king, Christian of Carrick, came to the cave, bringing with her fifteen mounted tenants and the promise of money and supplies. And it was from her that the king and Alex heard the terrible news of his family and friends, of his brothers' fates, Thomas and Alexander and Nigel all hanged, drawn, and beheaded, along with his sister's husband Sir Christopher Seton, and the Earl of Atholl. And he heard, too, of how his wife and her attendants and even his daughter were imprisoned, though now his daughter was in a nunnery instead of the cage where Edward had first put her.

Stricken, Alex asked hoarsely how fared the Lady Montgomery, and Christian replied that she, too, was in a nunnery, but he knew not where. It was a relief and a shock, and he mumbled a request to be excused from the king's presence but left without hearing it given.

Outside, he drew in a deep breath that smelled of spruce and cold air, and thought of his lady as he'd last seen her, riding bravely away, her spine straight and her head held high. He went to his knees then, as he'd not done since a lad, and closed his eyes against the pain and tears. And he resolved that he would find her, no matter how long it took. He would never give up the quest.

Eight

Lincoln, 1314

“Stay wi’ me, lass.” A voice urged her not to leave, Gillian thought hazily. A familiar voice in a familiar accent. Thick, the words were in a burr redolent of the Highlands. *Alex*. He’d come for her. At last. It’d been so long since she’d seen him. Four years? Five? No, six. She felt so strange, so sleepy and weary. It was hard to think. Difficult to recall things best forgotten. Save for Alex...yea, save for Alex. Not for a single moment had she ever forgotten him. Nor would she. He was her love. Her life. Her forever.

“Stay wi’ me, lass,” the voice said again, and he sounded so sorrowful that she tried once again to open her eyes. This time she succeeded, and though he was but a blur, she looked upon Alex’s handsome face with a faint smile.

“You came for me,” she whispered hoarsely, and he let out a great shout.

“She lives! Father Joseph, come quickly—she lives!”

A cowed priest hurried toward them, disbelief changing to joy when he knelt beside her pallet. “’Tis a miracle, my son. Our prayers have been answered.”

“Yea,” Alex said, sounding suddenly fierce, “’tis a miracle they did not kill her, though they certainly tried.”

“Silence, my son,” the priest leaned forward to say softly, “for even the walls have ears.”

Frowning, she had a brief flash of iron bars, stone walls, leering guards and constant, aching cold. Then it was gone as Alex leaned over her again, his face finally coming into focus. She smiled, put up a hand to touch him, her fingers grazing the scar on his left cheek that was compliments of a sword. It only made him more dear to her. A badge of honor, of courage. Of determination.

“Rest, my lovely lady,” Alex murmured, “for when you are healed we have a promise to keep.”

And she remembered then that they’d sworn to take their marriage vows in the small kirk where he’d been baptized, to swear undying love for one another for all eternity. It didn’t matter that the world she knew was gone, for all things passed eventually. She’d learned that. The carelessness of youth was forever gone. Now she knew how precious was each hour that passed. All the lost hours with Alex...

So she clung to his hand, wanting to tell him that during those long months and years she’d kept his memory bright, remembered their laughter and their love, and it was that most of all that had kept her from yielding to the cold hand of death. Now she felt its breath close, and knew there was little time. Tears stung her eyes, but she didn’t allow them to fall. He’d not see her weep. His last memory of her would not be of tears, but of love. She cleared her throat.

“Do you still think of that bonny lass from beyond the braes, Alex?”

“Not since May Day eighteen years ago,” he replied promptly and firmly. “All that lies beyond the braes for me now is this bonny lass whose hand I now hold.”

A faint smile tugged at her mouth. “I doubt Mary has forgotten you.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He said it so fiercely she looked at him in some surprise. His hand tightened around her fingers. “You are all I want. All I need. When you’re feeling better we’ll go to Skye where the wind blows fair so you may recover.”

She shook her head sadly. “Nay, love. I’ll not be there save in spirit. No, listen to me. I’ve not much time. And...and I’ve a task for you.”

Stormy eyes met hers, darkening, then he looked away. His mouth set into a tight line and his voice was thick. “What is it, my lady love?”

She summoned the strength to ask, “I must know about Countess Buchan. Lady Isabel—”

“She lives,” he said. “Though in fear of her life. She

escaped her prison, but is still being sought by the king's son, Edward Second."

Closing her eyes she thought of Isabel's bravery, all she'd lost for her courage in crowning Robert Bruce king, and knew what she must do. It was difficult, but she forced out the words even when Alex tried to stop her. "When I am dead give my name as...Lady Isabel, Countess Buchan. Do that...for her. It is the least I can do since she once saved my life."

"Nay...Gillian, God's teeth, no! Stay wi' me, lass."

"I fear I cannot. But Isabel's still strong despite all that's happened—oh my love, do not look at me like that. I want to stay, to be with you...but that choice has been taken from me. I feel it. Promise me. Swear an oath to me that you will do that for her—for me."

Stricken, Alex looked at her for a long moment, and she saw the hope die in his eyes. "Aye," he said finally, his voice thick and fierce, "I shall do as you ask me do, but hear this—I am not far behind you when you leave this world. I will love you forever, through all eternity."

"Yea," she whispered, "for all eternity. We shall have our chance at happiness there."

"Nay, we shall have it here. Stay wi' me, lass. Stay wi' me!"

It was cold, so cold, and the stark room began to fade away, receding into some distant blur that ceased to matter. All that mattered was the hard, bright hope that they would meet again beyond the braes...

Alex saw her slip away, held her hand until the last breath slipped gently from between her lips to frost the chill air of the abbey room. Then he bent his head in grief and savage anger, curbing the sudden need for violence. He didn't know how long he sat there beside her pallet, until the priest put a hand upon his shoulder and he looked up.

"My son, she is in God's hands now," he began but Alex jerked abruptly to his feet, frightening the much smaller man into scuttling backward several steps.

A grim smile curled his mouth as he tossed the priest a purse of coins. "Here, Father, payment for masses to pray for

her soul.”

“And her name, my son?”

Sucking in a deep breath, he said flatly, “Lady Isabel, Countess of Buchan.”

A debt repaid to both.

When he turned to go, the priest said, “Will you not wait for her burial?”

If she’d lived, he would have lingered, but all that was left was the lovely, still figure that bore little resemblance to the fiery woman he had known and loved. Only the shell remained.

“I cannot,” he said. “My king needs me.” And he must hurry to Bannockburn to join him.

* * * *

The English were defeated. Alex realized it dimly, lying beneath his dead mount as the battle turned to a complete rout. Oddly, though he knew he must be dying, he felt no pain. Only a sense of regret and bittersweet triumph. They had won their freedom, but he had lost what made his world worthwhile. *Gillian...*

“Sir Alex!” A man knelt beside him, lifted his head gently, then wiped blood from his brow so that Alex could see James Douglas. He managed a smile and a whispered question.

“We...took...the field...?”

Douglas nodded. “Aye, that we did. The English are in full retreat, King Edward has fled, and Stirling will soon be ours. Scotland is free, lad. Free!”

Alex tried to grin, but nothing seemed to work right. It must be near dark, for the sun had dimmed and shadows shrouded the land. Despite the heat of the summer air, cold gripped him. The hilt of an English sword still protruded from his side, yet he felt only a strange lassitude and numbness. He wanted to tell Sir James that his sword should be given to his younger brother, but all that came out was “*Gillian...stay wi’ me, lass...*”

Nine

Stay with me, lass....

Susan's eyes snapped open and she sucked in a deep breath of air that provoked a violent fit of coughing. Her throat was raw and her lungs ached, and someone was yelling for a nurse.

"Stop it, dammit!" she got out, and heard a startled laugh. An acrid taste in her mouth made her nauseous, and as her vision cleared, she saw Ryan Douglas peer at her with a grin.

"Guess that's the thanks I get for saving your life. No, don't try to get up. The nurse is on the way."

Staring at him, Susan suddenly remembered everything: The play. The fire. Kildrummy. *Alex*...she began to shiver uncontrollably, and Ryan's grin turned to alarm.

"Hey, don't go into shock...hang on. Here. I'll put this blanket over you. I called the nurse. You were hit in the head by the falling wall. Just don't move around much, okay?"

As if she could. For when she looked at Ryan, she saw Alex. It was the eyes. Not exactly the color or shape, but deeper than that. It was crazy. She'd been unconscious and had a very real dream. Or hallucination. But it'd been so detailed, and seemed to take so long...and was still so vivid. The emotions were still so sharp, grief mixing with love and passion, that her heart ached for all that had been endured.

When Ryan turned back to stare down at her with concern, he reached for her hand. The contact sent electrical currents pulsing through her, and from the look on his face, she knew he felt it, too. His eyes widened, darkened, held her gaze as if searching for answers.

"It's you," he said finally, huskily, as if just awakening from a long sleep. "You're here."

"What...do you mean?"

He sucked in a sharp breath. "My dream. This is going to sound crazy, but since I was a kid, I've had these dreams.

Sometimes they're brief, but they're always so vivid, and they always end the same way even though different things may happen in them. There's this woman in my dreams, lovely, sweet, passionate—and I lose her even though I'm begging her to stay with me. I call out to her but she slips away, sometimes into this gray mist, sometimes across the water, and sometimes, she just fades into memory, but I feel her loss so deeply that I know I must find her again." He laughed, an uncertain sound, and looked away toward the glass partition that led to the hospital corridor. "It always feels like I've lost the love of my life when she disappears. When I wake, I feel abandoned. It seems I've searched for her my entire life. Now, somehow, I get this sense that you'll understand."

"I do." It came out in a whisper and when he turned to look down at her again she said, "I have the same dreams. But I once promised you we'd have eternity together, didn't I?"

Ryan gave an inarticulate sound and his grip tightened on her fingers. "Is it—?"

"Gillian. Aye, my love, now and forever."

"You know her name."

"I know her life. I know her love—don't ask me how or why but I know all of it. It's as if it were only yesterday at Kildrummy..."

"Oh my God. It *is* you."

They stared at each other, while the muted beeping of the machines marking her heart rate and blood pressure made the only sound for several minutes.

"Is it possible?" Ryan asked at last, and she shook her head.

"I don't know. I never thought so before, but now—I just had the most vivid dream, and you were in it, not as Robert Bruce, but as—"

"Alex Campbell."

A shiver tracked her spine, and his grip tightened. "Yes," she murmured, "yes"

Holding her hand, he said softly, "I guess I've been looking for you all this time, but when I first saw you, I didn't believe it could be true. Now...now I know."

She drew in a deep breath. "Then we've found each other at last."

"Do you think it's real?"

He nodded. "This time, it's real. This time, it's not just a dream of a time long past. This time, we'll be together for all eternity."

She smiled, for she knew it was true, knew that against incredible odds, against everything she'd ever thought possible, their love had come full circle and they'd been given another chance.

Leaning over her, Ryan kissed her, long and deep, a soul-kiss that said she'd come home at last. Eternity beckoned.

* * * *

July in Scotland was fair and beautiful. Warm days with bright sun, and short, cool nights with the peaks of Ben Nevis in the distance. An ancient kirk of the Campbell clan lay tucked into a copse of trees and near forgotten by time and man, but Ryan had found it. There, in the beauty of the still wild Highlands where once war had raged, peace reigned. And there, in the ruins of the kirk, they were wed, as once they had promised to be. Susan wore sprigs of heather in her hair, and Ryan wore a Campbell kilt and a Douglas bonnet, in honor of both clans.

Later, they lodged in a solitary cottage overlooking Loch Leven. It was simple but comfortable, yet they had no need of anything but each other. They'd waited for this moment, the time when they were wed, to consummate their love.

Now, as he looked into her eyes, Ryan knew that his dreams had come true, that the fair lass he'd loved and lost so long ago had been returned. All these years he'd searched for her, but not realized who he was looking for until he'd found her. It was a miracle.

"Are you happy?" he asked huskily, and the tears in her eyes and smile on her face said as much as her words.

"More happy than ever I thought I could be. Ryan...to have found each other after all the centuries—it seems impossible."

"Love makes everything possible." He drew her to him,

and bent his head to kiss her. She tasted so sweet, her lips parting for him. “Stay with me, lass?”

“Yes, my heart. For all eternity,” she whispered, and he knew that this time it was true. This time, they’d have their eternity together.

* * * *

Because it seemed to draw them, they went back to the falls near St. Fillan’s priory where they’d so briefly shared an afternoon long ago. It was ruins now, moss-covered stones jutting up from bright green grass. Susan barely recalled the way it had been, but Ryan walked the ruins as if he’d been here just the day before. The expression on his face was one of pride and sorrow. It was a mixture of emotions she understood.

Everything was so strange, the blend of past and present bewildering, sad, and joyous at the same time. No one would ever believe them if they told it, so they’d not shared the truth with anyone. Even their family and closest friends. If it somehow leaked out, the tabloids would make soap star Ryan Douglas and his unknown new bride seem foolish and publicity hungry, or worse—crazy. Sometimes Susan worried about that herself. It didn’t seem true. It still seemed more like a dream. A wonderful dream.

They’d traveled so much of Scotland since being married in the Campbell kirk, revisiting places Robert Bruce had made famous. Except Bannockburn. Susan couldn’t bring herself to go with Ryan to Bannockburn where he’d died so long ago. She didn’t know why. Surely, if anyone, she should know there was another life after death. That the soul traveled many journeys, and saying farewell didn’t always mean forever. Maybe one day she’d go with him there, but now she just wanted to visit places where they’d been happy.

They’d already visited Kildrummy Castle, ruins now as well, but with the Snow Tower still intact enough they could remember stealing time together in curtained alcoves. And in the solar where Lady Gillian had left Sir Alex Campbell standing in nothing but his boots. Others at the ruins had looked at them strangely when they dissolved in laughter, probably

wondering what they found so amusing in lichen stones.

But now, here, at St. Fillan's priory where they were the only visitors at the ruins, Ryan's face reflected a far different mood. Susan sat on a flat stone and waited, watched him walk places in his memory that only he could know. Finally he turned to look at her. He smiled.

"We're married despite that stubborn priest."

Susan laughed. "It took a few hundred years, but you got your way after all. Time hasn't changed your stubbornness, either."

Grinning, he strode across the grass toward her. Her heart lurched. Sunlight made his dark hair gleam. He wore a kilt, not the Douglas tartan but the Campbell, though in Bruce's time the patterns didn't matter. Wool had been dyed with plants native to the area. Cockades in the men's bonnets signaled their clan.

When Ryan reached her he lifted her easily from the stone. "I always thought we'd come back here one day. Care for a trip down memory lane?"

"I thought that's what we've been doing."

His grin turned wicked, and the light in his eyes made her nipples harden. "I have another memory in mind. Remember the falls?"

"The—*oh!*" She smiled. "Oh yeah. I remember a *lot* about the waterfalls."

It didn't take long to find their way to the waterfalls. Bay willows still grew in shallow waters, and currents slid and tumbled over rocks to meet with a stream that'd end up joining the river. Mossy tussocks cushioned rocks, and the air smelled cool and clean.

Ryan came up behind her where she stood on the mossy banks. "How about a repeat?" he asked in her ear, his tone low and raspy.

Susan leaned back against him. "What if someone sees us?"

"They won't. We had to cross a farmer's land to get here ourselves. The only visitors are likely to be sheep."

"Or cows." She shivered when he bent his head to kiss her

on the neck, then he lifted her hair and loosened it from the French braid that kept it from her eyes. He shoved his fingers into her hair and spread it out on her shoulders.

“Beautiful,” he said huskily. “Like spun gold.” His hands moved down her arms to her wrists, and he pulled her firmly against him. Even through his kilt and her Levi’s, she felt his erection nudge against her. Her pulses quickened. The air got thick and hot.

Before she had time to come to her senses, he had her windbreaker, boots, jeans, tee shirt, and bra off and on the ground. She sucked in a sharp breath when his palms cupped her breasts and his fingers teased her nipples. Heat from his hands warmed her bare skin.

Dipping his hands to the waistband of her bikinis, he slowly pulled them down, trailing kisses along the arch of her spine. Cool air brushed over her and she shivered, but not from the cold. Ryan knelt behind her, gently lifted first one leg, then the other, to free her from the bikinis. She thought he’d turn her around then but he didn’t. Instead, he licked a leisurely path down her thighs to the bends of her knees, one hand reaching up to touch her between her legs.

It was oddly erotic standing there naked with him behind her fully clothed. Moss was soft between her toes, springy and cool. A wind swayed willow branches and dragged long strands of her hair across her face. Pulsing heat blossomed when he stroked her clitoris with his thumb. She closed her eyes. Heat turned into breathless need, and she spread her thighs wider. Ryan slipped a finger inside her, then two. Susan gasped.

“Touch your breasts,” Ryan murmured, his lips moving against the back of her thigh.

Quivering, she slowly put her hands up to her breasts. The movements of his hand grew faster and the sense of urgency escalated. Nipples hard, she rolled them between her fingers in a rhythm that nearly matched the rub of his thumb over her clit and the thrust of his fingers inside. Climax burst on her quickly, white and hot and strong.

Before she collapsed, Ryan stood up and held her against him with his arms just under her breasts. The kilt was gone.

His bare cock nudged her buttocks. It was wet and hot and hard. She leaned into him, breathing slowly growing even.

Then, as so long before, Ryan gently lowered her to a cushion of bog moss and brushed her hair from her eyes. He kissed her mouth, the slope of her cheek and arch of her throat. When she closed her eyes, he kissed her eyelids, then blew softly into her ear. She shivered.

He laughed softly. "I think we've done this before, my lady."

Opening her eyes, she looked up at him with a smile. Emotion beat hard, all past sorrows fading as she took his face between her hands. Beard stubble grazed her palms, and she caressed the grooves on each side of his mouth with her thumbs.

"A time or two, Sir Knight."

The laughing light in Ryan's eyes turned darker, more serious. A slight muscle leaped in his jaw. "I thought once I'd lost you forever," he said hoarsely. "You were always just a dream to me...sometimes when I look at you, I can't believe we're together again."

"At last."

He took her hand and kissed her palm, looking up at her through his thick black lashes. "At last. Now. Forever."

She smiled.

He cupped her breasts in his palms and dragged his tongue around the pebbled peaks, and sucked first one, then the other into his mouth. Her stomach muscles knotted, and a steady beat pulsed through her all the way to her uterus. It contracted with each suction, and fever spread through her entire body. Arching her back, she lifted her hips in open invitation. Ryan teased her, licking her all around her nipples then closing his lips on them to suck for a moment until the pulsebeat between her legs got so hard and strong it almost hurt.

"Ryan..."

"Not yet...not yet."

He moved lower, tongue dragging over her ribs, then dipping into her navel. When she reached for him to put his hard cock inside her, he took her wrists in his hands and held them out to the sides. His tongue licked over the soft brown

curls on her pubis mound, lower...lower...and flicked against her clitoris. She moaned and parted her legs wider, lifting a little. He blew softly on the damp crevice, cool air quickly followed by the heat of his tongue. She writhed, panting, needing him but loving the torture. When he sucked the tiny pink nub into his mouth she almost screamed. It took only a few strong pulls before orgasm washed through her again.

Still not releasing her hands, Ryan moved up and over her. The expression on his face was so intense, almost fierce, and while her vagina muscles still contracted he pushed his hard cock into her. She cried out with pleasure. It felt as if he'd pushed all the way to her ribs, so big and hard and welcome...panting now, she lifted her hips to encourage him, and he thrust more deeply inside when she'd have sworn he couldn't. It felt so good...everything whirled around her, the musical splash of the falls, the soft whish of wind through willow limbs, the fine mist of water spray on them, the feel of the cool green moss below her...and Ryan a part of her, as close as a man could get to a woman, body and soul and past and present all melded together.

Pounding into her, the exquisite drag and thrust of his shaft brought them both to a swift climax. Ryan groaned and lowered his head so that his face lay in her hair spread over the moss. He was still hard inside her, and after a few moments, he began to move again, slower this time, dragging out the luxurious intimacy. Afterward, they fell asleep in each others arms, there on the moss beneath the willows, the burn chuckling and birds serenading the celebration of reunion.

* * * *

When they woke, purple shadows deepened on the hills around them. Ryan sat up first.

"Beautiful dreamer," he teased, "we've still got to walk back to the car."

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, smiling sleepily. "It's July. It doesn't get dark until after midnight."

"Lazy girl."

"If I could stay right here and not move for a week, that'd be fine with me." Blinking, she sat up, and he reached out to

push a strand of loose hair behind her ear. Pale brown strands mixed in with the soft gold color, a natural shade that couldn't be duplicated. It felt so soft in his palm, like silk.

Emotion choked him so that for a moment he couldn't speak. Then he said lightly, "I'm afraid we shocked the sheep."

Susan glanced over at the sheep chewing their cud and staring at them from a small rise. "I bet they have a tale to tell the farmer, then."

He grinned. "We can give them a few more tales before we leave."

She arched a brow. "Hm. That sounds tempting."

"Come on. It's been a few hundred years since we've bathed in these falls. Let's see if it's still as cold."

"Ryan—no!"

Ignoring her, he pulled her into the burn, taking her out to the middle where it was deeper and laughing at her when she squealed. When she found her footing on the bottom, she hit the water with the edge of her palm and splashed him.

"I can swim this time," she warned. "Don't think you can take advantage of me again."

Sputtering from the unexpected dash of water, he pretended to be off-balance, then caught her by the back of her leg and ducked her. She came up dripping and coughing, wiping water from her eyes to glare at him. Her nipples were beaded and pink, her lashes thick with water. She put her hands on her hips.

"Now it's war."

"Bring it on," he said.

They played until they were tired, then sat out on the moss again. He put his wool kilt over her shoulders when she shivered, and held her against him. Stars blinked dimly against the darkening sky, and a thumbnail moon gleamed on the eastern horizon. Neither spoke, just let the twilight and companionship surround them.

Then Susan said into the softness, "There was a child, you know."

He went still. "A child?"

She nodded. "Long ago. A daughter. I saw her only briefly

before she was taken from me. I held her close...she had dark hair and blue eyes, and a mouth like a rosebud. When I put out my finger to stroke her cheek, she curled hers around it and held on so tightly...then the nuns came to take her away. I never saw her again.”

Ryan didn't know what to say. Suddenly he felt keenly the loss of a child he'd never known existed, though it'd been seven hundred years ago.

“A child,” he repeated softly. “Why didn't you tell me that day I found you?”

“There was nothing you could have done. I wanted to spare you the pain I felt at parting with her. If you had...had survived at Bannockburn, the priests were to send you a message from me with all the information I knew about her. I couldn't put that burden on you before a battle.”

For a few minutes he didn't say anything. Then he pulled her into the shelter of his arm and chest. “We found each other after all this time. She'll find us.”

Susan looked up at him with such love in her eyes a hard lump clogged his throat.

“I believe she will.”

The Dream Fulfilled

“Stay here with me, lass.”

Husky with passion, his voice in her ear made her heart leap. She couldn't speak, could only reach for him, body rising to meet his. Raw emotion filled her with a sense of overwhelming joy.

Reaching for him, she slid her hands down his body and found him hard and ready for her. Fingers curled around the turgid length, caressed him until she heard his groan in her ear and knew he was impatient for her. As she was for him.

Waiting only heightened the anticipation, so she moved down in the bed, kissed the flat plane of his stomach, and cradled his balls in one hand while her other moved feather light over his hard cock. He was more than ready for her. His balls tightened in her palm, his hips arched as he thrust into her fist eagerly, and he made a wonderful, sensual sound low in his throat. Then he reached for her, hands finding her breasts in the dim light of the room that looked out over Loch Leven. His fingers teased her nipples until she caught her breath and looked up at him. He had the same look in his eyes that must be in hers, a light of passion and need and emotion.

Heart beating in time with the steady throbbing between her legs, she put her tongue out to rake it over his shaft, up and down, doing circles, then flicking against the tip.

“God...Susan...” He started to sit up but she gently pushed him back down.

“Not yet...not yet.”

She parted her lips and took him in her mouth, lips sliding slowly down the thick shaft as far as she could, then sucked on him as she worked her way back up. His cock filled her mouth, hard and ready, juices flowing. She released him for a moment, flicked her tongue in a teasing caress over the tip, then slowly took him in again, even farther this time.

Ryan groaned. His fingers plucked at her nipples, spread over her breasts in an erotic caress that made her inhale sharply.

He obviously liked that, the feel of cool air along with the heat of her mouth. Cupping his testicles in her palm, she gently rolled them while she sucked hard on his cock, until she knew by the tightening of his balls and the arch of his hips that he'd neared climax. Instead of pulling away, she held him still, let his juices burst into her mouth, then lubricated his pulsing shaft with them before she rose to her knees and moved over him.

He was still hard, ready, and she spread her legs with a knee on each side of his hips. He was hot and wet, and so was she as she poised briefly. Holding his eyes, with his hands on her breasts and his hard cock eager for her, she slid down the thick length until she was so full with him she could barely breathe. Life throbbed inside her, so hard and alive, the memory of days past and anticipation of days ahead bringing tears to her eyes. This was all she'd ever wanted, to be with him, to know their time together would last long in this life and forever in the next.

Closing her eyes, she rocked forward, slowly at first, then faster and faster. He'd moved his hands to pull her slightly forward so that her clitoris hit his pubic bone with her every motion. Then he caressed her breasts again, his strong fingers plucking at the nipples, rolling them as she moved ever closer to that elusive peak.

Then Ryan paused with his hands still on her breasts, his voice thick and husky. "Susan—my lady Gillian, my dearest—will you love me always?"

"Yes, my heart," she whispered, "for all eternity."

With the smell of heather in the warm, soft air that caressed their naked bodies, and the lilting, timeless wail of bagpipes drifting across the glen, release came, washing over her like a white-hot star, obliterating all around her as she held tightly to him. She lay there, drowsy, replete, and happier than she'd ever thought possible.

Ryan lay a gentle hand on her soft, rounded belly. She smiled. Soon there would be three of them, together at last.

Just a new beginning...